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ARTE CLANDESTINO:
REBELLION, GRAPHIC ART AND YOUTH CULTURE IN OAXACA, MEXICO

By:
ELIZABETH ROSE BARNETT

Under the Direction of Emanuela Guano PhD

ABSTRACT:

In examining the artistic mobilization of the *Asamblea Revolucionaria de Artistas de Oaxaca* (ASARO), this thesis focuses on the transformative potential of the artists' spatial practices through their investment in utilizing urban spaces throughout the city (Lefebvre 1991). Spatial politics of artists allows them to create "spaces of representation" through which they can represent themselves to the wider public (Mitchell 1995). Drawing on Habermas' (1989) notion of public sphere - a place where private people come together to discuss and engage in critical, rational debate to form and or influence a public option - I argue that in stenciling their graphic messages on city walls, members of this artistic movement are physically and symbolically creating space for themselves in discussions and debates that they have historically been excluded from. Speaking from the perspective of shared experiences and struggles, ASARO's images work to produce the collective subject of *el pueblo* (the people).

INDEX WORDS: Street Art, Spatial Practices, Public Space, Urban Anthropology, Social Movements, Cultural Resistance, Revolution, Populism, Oaxaca, Mexico.

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By

ELIZABETH R. BARNETT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters in Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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By

ELIZABETH R. BARNETT

Committee Chair: Emanuela Guano

Committee: Kathryn Kozaitis

Steven Black

Cassandra White

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 First encounter with Oaxacan Street Art

Despite local officials' best attempts to depict the tourist location of Oaxaca City as picturesque, tranquil, and docile, within hours of first traveling to the city I realized that there was something not quite right. It was Oaxaca's urban art that first screamed out to me that there was extreme tension and unrest in the city. During my first visit to Oaxaca in the summer of 2009, an encounter between street art and a group of federal police left a lasting impression on me as to the ideological and symbolic power of urban protest art. One night, as I was walking home with a group of other students from UC-Davis, we came across a city wall covered in government posters denouncing the "delinquency and criminal activity" of street artists and threatening jail time and prosecution for anyone who "defiled" public space. It was apparent that these posters were covering up something that the local officials did not want the passerby to see. However, such posters only made the drawing underneath more enticing for us. Curiosity got the best of us. "What could be so important that the government went through so much trouble to cover it up?" we wondered.

As if perfectly timed, the moment we pulled away the government announcement that covered the artwork, three federal police came around the corner. In what seemed like three hours, they, one by one, threatened to take us to jail for our "illegal" desire to look at what was underneath. Eventually they let us go with a stern warning. All that for a stencil that called attention to the government's role in the disappearance of union organizers and calling for their safe return. I was left thinking, what was it about such artwork that warranted such a repressive response? The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role of artistic expression and youth

culture and identity in Oaxaca. In more than six years since my first experience with street art in Oaxaca, Oaxaca's street art movements continue to have an active and prominent role throughout not only Oaxaca, but also, as it has spread, throughout Mexico and the world.



Image 1: Map of Mexico with Oaxaca Highlighted. (Arenas 2011)

This thesis addresses the question of how marginalized youth within the urban space of Oaxaca City respond to and mobilize against oppressive regimes. This research also examines the ways in which various mediums of street art in Oaxaca are utilized by urban youth as a means to empower and mobilize others and to voice their generation's dissatisfaction with the political, cultural, and environmental status of their society. By focusing on the daily life, motivations, and experiences of urban street artists in Oaxaca, Mexico, this project contributes to scholarly understanding of urban youth mobilization and countercultural response to an urban environment filled with violence, injustice, and inequality.

In this thesis I argue that the aesthetic revolution that is taking place throughout the streets of Oaxaca is much more than just an artistic counter-cultural response to the economic, political, social, environmental, and cultural crisis in Mexico. As Mitchell (1995) demonstrates, spatial politics allows marginalized groups to create "spaces of representation" through which they can

represent themselves to the wider public and insert themselves in the discourses of the dominant public sphere. In stenciling their graphic messages on city walls, members of this artistic movement are physically and symbolically creating space for themselves in discussions and debates over the future of their state and nation. Unfortunately, some scholarly research addressing urban street art, especially in the realm of graffiti, focuses on the anti-establishment, counter-cultural, and potentially estetically damaging nature of this art (See Lachmann 1988; Bushnell 1990; Ferrell 1993; Wimsatt 1994; Brighenti 2010). Instead of taking this approach, this study examines the artistic mobilization of *Asamblea Revolucionaria de Artistas de Oaxaca* (ASARO) as an alternative, yet productive way for Oaxaca's youth to actively communicate with both locals and foreigners in conversations that those in power have historically excluded them from. Through art, Oaxaca's youth are creating and carving out their own space, identity, and voice within the fabric of Oaxacan and Mexican society and politics. Art has not only become the means for youth to assert their voice in both national and international spaces but has also become a means to empower and mobilize a silenced and oppressed generation. Through artistic expression, artists are able to visually and symbolically manipulate public space. Their images throughout public spaces provoke the passerby to think, question, and react to the images and messages in the artists' works. Through artistic production the artists are in direct engagement with, and inspire dialogue amongst, other members of Oaxaca's public. Speaking from the perspective of shared experiences and struggles, the artists' images reveal common points of identification that can work to produce the collective subject of el pueblo Oaxacaño (the Oaxacan people) and can help inspire collective action and mobilization.

One does not need to be in Oaxaca long before they run into a demonstration, march, or barricade, which are almost daily occurrences in the city. Your ability to discuss, know the

whereabouts, and navigate around such manifestations is, in some ways, a rite of passage and symbol of prolonged residency in the city. One evening on a cab ride home, my attempt to make small talk with my cab driver turned into a conversation about the local teacher union's plans to boycott the following day's elections. Knowing where the protests were planned, I jokingly told him that I would certainly be avoiding *el zócalo y calle hidalgo*. Somewhat stunned by my knowledge, he looked back in his rearview mirror at me and stated, "You have indeed lived here for awhile..." One is no longer a tourist when you have mastered the ability to understand the ebbs and flows of Oaxaca's infinite social mobilizations.



Image 2: Map of Indigenous Regions of Oaxaca (Arenas 2011)

In Oaxaca, artistic expression forms a critical part of current day social mobilization and resistance. When walking around Oaxaca City, the quality of art that can be found in the streets is striking. More than just beautifying these spaces, many of the pieces provide pointed sociopolitical commentary. However, Oaxaca is not unique in its use of socially charged art. Mexico in general, has a long history of revolutionary art. Especially well-known are the revolution-era muralists from the early 20th century, such as Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros.

These artists painted masterpieces in public spaces, aiming to create public and accessible visual dialogues with the Mexican people. Nonetheless, what makes Oaxaca's visual revolution stand out is its utilization of informal public spaces and commitment to making artistic expression universal and accessible to all citizens.

Contemporary artworks are imbedded in the social codes in which they are produced and are a "product of consciousness" filled with ideology (Wolff 1993:119). As Geertz (1983:99) suggests, art is a cultural system in which art functions to define social relationships and sustain or challenge social rules and gives valuable insights into social values. Artists are not only part of the cultural fabric that defines society, but they help contribute to this fabric by either reinforcing or challenging cultural values through their work. Art can directly or indirectly boost the confidence of groups, fostering an important sense of solidarity and unity. The street art movement in Oaxaca emphasizes how artistic expression can lead to the development of social awareness and can inspire and incite sociocultural changes.

1.2 Plan of Thesis

Before analyzing the ethnographic data collected during fieldwork, this thesis begins with a review of scholarly work relevant to the study of street art and the urban sphere and includes a section on the research methods and modes of analysis used during the course of this project. It will first examine the precise way in which art functions in the public sphere. In his theory of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1981) emphasizes the role of communication in public opinion. He argues that the public sphere is a realm of our social life that is neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests and is the space where something approaching a public opinion can be formed. This thesis explores the ways in which urban street artists in

Oaxaca play an important role in inspiring public debates and conversations and influencing and shaping popular consciousness. Drawing on the theories of Clifford Geertz (1983), this part of my literature review examines the ways in which art functions as an ideological process that expresses an insight beyond dominant sociocultural values. Building off the theories of Geertz, Nestor Garcia Canclini (2014) argues that contemporary artwork is now present throughout all aspects of society. In an increasingly globalized world, this thesis addresses Canclini's claim that geopolitical instability and profound economic, political, and cultural inequalities have shifted art's role in society. Artistic practices like those taking place in Oaxaca are part of, and modified by, other forces such as the financial market, the media, politics, and social movements. Art is no longer valued solely on its form, but has shifted to be valued by its context and function.

The literature review section will also focus on how artists and art influence public space. Henri Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of the triad of space will serve as a base to examine the ways in which art impacts and influences public space. According to Lefebvre, space is socially produced and public spaces not only provide the grounds for the visibility and voice of marginalized communities, but also works to foster group consensus and identity for those experiencing and relating to that space (Lefebvre 1991). Based on the theories of Lefebvre, this final section of the chapter will examine how art plays an essential role in the use and appropriation of public spaces - especially in popular social movements like that found in Oaxaca. Art plays a crucial role in social activism. In Oaxaca, use of urban space is shaping politics and interests rather than simply providing a stage on which to show them. City spaces not only provide the grounds for the visibility and voice of marginalized communities, but also work to foster group consensus and identity for those experiencing and relating to that space (Lefebvre 1991). This thesis emphasizes the importance of everyday spatial practices and a

recognition that, as Michel de Certeau states, “history begins at ground level, with footsteps” (1984:129). As Emanuela Guano (2003) demonstrates in her analysis of practical spatial narratives, public art holds the ability to interpellate the passersby and expose them to specific webs of meaning and nostalgic representations that construct and convey a specific story.

Following a brief summary of my methods and research process, the ethnography section of this thesis begins with an overview of the historical background necessary to understand the current day situation and circumstances in Oaxaca and its influence on Oaxaca’s street artists. Due to its central importance to the artists of Oaxaca, the majority of the historical overview focuses on the political, economic, social, and environmental climate that led to the Oaxacan popular uprising in 2006. After the brief historical overview, I provide a thorough ethnographic analysis of the data I collected during the course of my fieldwork in Oaxaca. This section will examine the collective memory that many of the artists share of the events of 2006. The events of 2006 arose and were heavily discussed in almost all of my interviews. The popular uprising helped to forge a strong shared experience and identity for many young Oaxacan artists and continues to influence the way they perceive and interact with the society they live in, as well as the artwork they produce. I will also examine the current day activities of those involved in creating urban art, and in the ways the artists’ agendas, goals, and viewpoints have shifted since 2006.

During the summer of 2015 when the fieldwork for this project was conducted, Oaxaca experienced a series of tumultuous events including election-time protests, teachers’ union blockades, and environmental activism against city construction projects. As these events were unfolding, the artists were reacting, organizing around and participating in these issues. Unlike during the 2006 social unrest, which attracted diverse public support, current day social

mobilizations in Oaxaca are met with public indifference and even hostility. As more and more residents of Oaxaca shift their support away from the teachers' movement, artists find themselves struggling to find that same sense of meaning and influence that they experienced in 2006. I examine the ways in which artists envision and structure their artwork as a way to remember, remobilize, and revitalize the citizenry of Oaxaca. The majority of artists I interviewed shared the common belief that Oaxaca holds a unique spot in Mexico as its "*Corazón Rebelde*" (its rebellious heart). The idea that Oaxaca is profoundly important as the spirit and heart of Mexico, is a common point of focus in the symbolization found within much of the artwork produced within the collectives. Despite the marginalization, exploitation, and racism experienced by Oaxacans, the artists take solace and pride in their roots, and their artwork proves to be a strong manifestation of this identity. This thesis demonstrates how, in Oaxaca, urban street art is far from destructive. Instead, artistic production and organization works to create, inspire and build resistance allowing Oaxacan residents an outlet to find and express their voice in the struggle for a more just and equal society.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mexico's Hegemonic Public Art

Hegemonic public art has a long history throughout Mexico. Following the 1910 revolution in Mexico, artists were recruited by the state to actively assist in their project of building a hegemony based on nationalist premises. State patronage of the arts throughout Mexico was extensive during this time. The Mexican mural movement was born in the 1920s, right after the Revolution (1910-1917), as a vehicle to represent the government's ideology and its vision of history. Along with other political, social and institutional changes which the country went through during these post-revolutionary years, there was a substantial change in art. Many Mexican artists demanded a new School of Art in order to break with any kind of academicism, and to create “real” Mexican art that would strengthen and reaffirm Mexican identity and the values of the Revolution. The “big tree” of Mexico’s most famous muralists, Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros shared the idea that art had to be public and for the people. They devoted themselves to large-scale murals in which they illustrated the history of Mexico, its people, its society, and the Revolution. They wanted to see the ideals of the Revolution put into practice in order to improve Mexican society (Coffey 2012).

The most important patron of the Mexican Mural Movement following the revolution was Oaxacan born, José Vasconcelos, President Alvaro Obregón's Minister of Education. During the 1920's Vasconcelos hired artists to paint murals throughout government buildings and public spaces as part of a broader effort to reinforce the knowledge of revolutionary history (Coffey 2012: 3). The government commissioned artists to decorate buildings with images of the cultural history of the country. According to Shifra Goldman (1994:101), Mexican muralists during this

time produced “an art of advocacy...intended to change consciousness and promote political action” by presenting the indigenous and colonial past in relation to political and cultural struggles in the post-revolutionary present. As a result, Mexican muralists created the iconography of the indigenous past as a resource that could be used in a project for making the present and future nation.

Some of the first murals commissioned by Vasconcelos were in public buildings such as the chapel of San Pedro and San Pablo. From 1929 to 1935, two of Mexico’s greatest muralists, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco were brought in by the government official to paint a series of murals in the National Palace about the history of Mexico (Sussman 2006). Those murals were meant to reflect on the nation's past in order to explore and promote the layers of national meaning derived from the mistreatment and domination of indigenous peoples by Europeans since the colonial period (Coffey 2012:3). Two of the four cycles of murals were painted by Rivera and the other two by Orozco. These works clearly demonstrate the dual process of cultural institutionalization and emergent nationalism that the muralists played a part in. As art historian Guisela Latorre notes, this form of *mestizaje* (mixing), “specifically in the Mexican context, did not provide platforms for self-representation for indigenous peoples.... The power of the public mural, as the Mexican muralists of the 1920s and 1930s knew, resided in its ability to not only prescribe ideology but also construct its own spectators” (2008:6). In their works for the Mexican government, the muralist visually depict the official argument for a social *mestizaje* of Mexican identity. This mestizo identity would be used by the state as a means to unite a broad and diverse Mexican populace under one national identity.

Mary Kay Vaughan (1982: 265) argues that in the post-revolutionary period muralists throughout Mexico helped to affirm working class and peasant participation in the revolution;

even as the populist ideology that they articulated functioned as a mechanism of social control. Vaughan argues that the murals provided the developing Mexican state with visual illustrations of the types of elite populism used as rhetoric by Mexican politicians. State patronage of the arts established this form of muralism as a form of governance. From this lens, Mexico's nationalist tradition of mural art is seen by many as neither revolutionary nor populist, but rather a cultural technique in the formation of the post-revolutionary state and its authoritarian ruling party (Coffey 2012: 2). Roger Bartra (2002: 4) uses the term official culture as a reference to both the collection of habits and values of the Mexican political and bureaucratic class and the art and literature that these elites approve of. These cultural processes have a legitimating, homogenizing and unifying effect. According to Bartra (2002: 6), official culture is an effect of elites' desire to create an ensemble of myths about Mexican identity. The street artists in Oaxaca are purposely and strategically challenging this hegemonic state art with their art's aesthetic and ideological messages that directly challenge and contradict much of the official art's messages.

In Oaxaca, artists are challenging aesthetic hierarches that relegate printmaking practices as inferior and less valuable when compared to other forms of artistic production. The art/craft divide highlights how certain Western cultural values determine what is considered art or not, and how such decisions get to be made on an institutional or cultural level by those that have power and money. According to Marcia Tucker (1994: 47-48), "the establishment of a separate folk category is a way of preserving the status and power of the leisure class by creating a "dumping ground" for all maverick forms of expression made by artists who don't share the high art values of that portion of society and might therefore pose a potential threat to it." Michael Chibnik (2006: 509) calls such elites "tastemakers." Traditionally, it has been these elites—state actors, European-educated intellectuals, wealthy foreign collectors—that have established artistic

authenticities in Mexico. Oaxaca's street art movement directly challenges these aesthetics as local artists continue to grow in popularity and gain national and international recognition.

2.2 What is the Role of Public Space in Bottom-up Resistance?

Whether it be community murals, graffiti, stickers, stencils or statues, Oaxacan street art plays an essential role in the use and appropriation of public space. However, Oaxacan artists are not the first to use such methods as a means of communication. Since ancient times, inscription has acted as a venue for exhibiting ideology. People throughout history have felt the need to share and express themselves in a public way, whether by telling a story or presenting a political ideology (Smith 2007: 11). In contemporary times, urban street artists conceive of urban landscapes as blank canvases for them to use to share their stories, ideologies, and messages. Today's street art movements evolved from political and esthetic ideologies that challenge the idea that art should look a certain way or serve a certain purpose (Rose and Strike 2004). Street artists use a plethora of mediums to express their views, intents, and actions and demonstrate how art can transform public settings and infuse them with meaning (Borghini et al. 2010). Street artists claim and shape the city through their work (Ehrenfeucht 2014: 968). Informal street art can work to produce alternative notions of property (Ehrenfeucht 2014: 968). Street art can also reinterpret property boundaries by using walls as a means to communicate publically (Ehrenfeucht 2014:968).

Almost all of the artists active in the Oaxacan street art movement recognize the importance of public space in the dissemination and impact of their art. In Oaxaca, public spaces not only provide the grounds for the visibility and voice of marginalized communities, but also work to foster group consensuses and identity for those experiencing and relating to that space.

In theorizing public space, this project builds heavily on philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of socially produced space. Lefebvre (1991) creates what he defines as the conceptual triad in explaining how space is produced. This triad consists of spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces. Spatial practices (perceived space) also thought of as physical places, are concerned with the production and reproduction of particular daily routines and urban realities (Lefebvre 1991: 38). Representations of space (conceived space) are framed as mental places that "are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations" (Lefebvre 1991: 33). They are the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers that tend towards a system of verbal signs such as maps, plans, designs and models (Lefebvre 1991: 38). These representations of space are deeply intertwined with dominant ideologies.

The third element of Lefebvre's triad is representational space (lived space) which is thought of as social place. This is the realm of space that most directly applies to the actions and influences of urban street artists in Oaxaca. These places are spaces that are lived through their "associated images and symbols and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'..." (Lefebvre 1991: 39). Representational spaces are the lived experiences that emerge as a result of the dialectical relation between spatial practice and representations of spaces. Lefebvre highlights that "space is at once result and cause, product and producer; it is also at stake, the locus of projects and actions deployed as part of specific strategies, and hence also the object of wagers on the future" (1974:142). The mutually productive relationship between spaces and social formations underscores the ways in which urban practices of struggle shape both people and place. Lefebvre's triad is crucial in understanding the process and power relations in which every

society produces and reproduces its own social space. Representational space overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects (1991:39). The slogans, signs of protest and murals that flood the streets of Oaxaca are symbolic manifestations of this space.

The production of public space is a continual struggle between the dominant group in society and varying subaltern groups. The dominant group in society is continuously trying to produce and maintain a seemingly homogeneous and ideologically driven representation of space while conversely, subaltern groups are working through oppositional elements to assert their "counter-spaces" and construct their "counter-publics" (Lefebvre, 1991:381-385). In stenciling their messages throughout the urban environment, Oaxaca's street artists are directly challenging hegemonic state power that works hard to structure, define and maintain a distinct image of the iconic city. As Mitchell (1995) and others have shown, the spatial practices of marginalized social groups can provide great insight into how a politics which problematizes generally held definitions of public space can be achieved. Discussions of how public space is produced, and what it might look like in the future, must be related to a politics that reshapes and reconceptualizes urban public space and asserts what Lefebvre saw as two interrelated rights: the right to the city and the right to difference. In his 1968 work, Lefebvre expressed the idea of the right to the city as a way to conceptualize the empowerment of urban dwellers to participate in shaping their urban environment. His work examines the rights of the city's marginalized citizens to be actively involved in the production of the city to meet their own needs and aspirations- not for the exclusive benefit of those with money and power as occurs in most urban development. Thus, the right to the city fundamentally challenges existing power relations and the deep roots of capitalist systems which are responsible for driving urban development and the production of urban space. For Purcell (2003:564), the right to the city is practiced in the most

direct sense, as a right to configure the urban space in all its manifestations. Along similar lines, David Harvey (2003: 941) argues that the right to the city is not “merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart’s desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image.” In Oaxaca, urban space is shaping politics and interests rather than simply providing a stage on which to show them. City spaces not only provide the grounds for the visibility and voice of marginalized communities but also work to foster group consensuses and identity for those experiencing and relating to that space (Lefebvre 1991).

Mitchell (1995) demonstrates how people can successfully take claim over space in order to turn private spaces into public spaces (Ehrenfeucht 2014: 967). In his work, spatial practices are central to the assertion of different views and political projects. Mitchell argues that public spaces gain political importance when they are taken by marginalized groups and restructured as “spaces for representation.” In this conceptualization, public spaces are material places; sites from which political activity flows. As groups endow material space with memories, mappings, and meanings, the space itself becomes a critical site for sociopolitical contestation. The public adapts and appropriates new public spaces such as streets, sidewalks, and walls as important alternatives to rapidly disappearing public spaces such as parks (Chase et al. 1999; Franck and Stevens 2007). Scholars view public space as an important site for civic participation and democratic debate (Grodach 2009: 474; Mitchell 1995). While these spaces are culturally and socially patterned and can create and bind community, they are also highly differentiated from person to person (Smith and Low 2006). Susan Gal (2002) argues that the distinction between public and private is a ubiquitous part of daily life that is constantly being renegotiated through communication and semiotics. While it proves nearly impossible to not consume public space,

one individual may view a public space in quite a different way than another individual. An individual's economic, political, and social identity influences the ways in which he or she interprets, relates to, consumes and occupies public space. As anthropologist Setha Low has noted, there is a need to continue developing “an anthropology *of* the city, rather than *in* the city” that assesses “the ‘urban’ as a process rather than as a type or category” (1996:384). As an anthropology of Oaxacan spatiality, a central issue in this thesis is how collective subjects are formed in and through an encounter with the city’s material environment.

Bruno Latour (1999; 2005) suggests that public space can exert power as a consequential actant that transforms social relations and forms political consciousness and identity of particular publics. Latour’s actor-network theory conceptualizes objects, such as art, as part of social networks. In essence, this theory allows for non-humans to act and participate in social dialogues and interactions. As different groups within Oaxaca endow the same material space with different memories, mappings, and meanings, space itself becomes a critical site for socio-political contestation and struggle. Latour would argue that this space becomes a non-human actant that contributes to shaping, and even becomes a medium for the social struggles themselves. In focusing on the transformative potential of artists’ spatial practices through their investment in the material spaces of the city, the thesis contends that political subjectivities are formed in and through an encounter with the city’s material environment. Once the artists leave their art in public, that space with or without the artist, interacts and communicates with the passerby in varying ways. Therefore, this thesis envisions urban space not as a passive landscape, but as an agent that yields power and holds transformative potential. Human actions, ideologies, and power relations are intricately connected to the essential role the objects play in society’s social networks.

Essential to this thesis is a discussion of how street art functions in public space. According to Kurt Iveson (2010a: 130), street art may attack “the property relation” and directly challenges the city’s well-planned structure and public-private boundaries. Kurt Iveson (2010: 130) argues that “through a style of free communication,” artists in the public sphere create a city in common. Urban street artists such as graffiti writers both claim and produce urban space as they move through the city (Ehrenfeucht 2014: 967; Iveson 2010). Street art contributes to the construction of public spaces by "using public and private property as a surface for communication” (Iveson 2010:130). The "street" allows for anonymity, diversity, openness, and spontaneity that encourages the public to engage in and exchange meaningful dialogues (Jacobs 1961).

Also relevant to the study of street artists in Oaxaca is the discussion of the ways in which public space gets consumed. Scholars have pointed to the important role that the built environment has in the development and communication of ideologies (Visconti et al. 2009: 514). The built environment acts as a canvas and often a palimpsest. Even though street art is often temporary and constantly being changed and added to, its existence alone works to symbolically restore private to public, and engages the passive passersby - stimulating them into interaction (Visconti et al. 2010: 515). Shelley Sacks (2005) views art as an instrument that encourages communications amongst people, issues, and places. Art attracts spectators and encourages them to participate in important discourses that aim to achieve a desired social result (Visconti et al. 2010: 515). According to Visconti et al. (2010: 526), by placing their art in unexpected or forbidden spaces, street artists create an esthetic commons that invites belonging and participation amongst all of the public and stimulates reflection and social action. In essence, street artists, such as those in Oaxaca, can be thought of as "curators" (Schalk 2007). Their works

heighten the public nature of a site and empower those who experience and relate to the art. As curators, the artists are "independent cultural workers" who are able to bypass the restrictions placed upon them by bureaucratic building regulations (Schalk 2007:165). In doing so, artists are able to create relationships of "greater connectedness" between people and environments (Schalk 2007: 157).

Due to street artist's prominent role in the physical and sociopolitical landscape of Oaxaca, this thesis also focuses on the transformative potential of the artists' spatial practices through their investment in utilizing urban spaces throughout the city. It examines how political subjectivities are formed in and through an encounter with the city's material environment. Public spaces hold the power to transform social relations and form political consciousness and identity of particular publics. As groups endow material space with memories, mappings, and meanings, space itself becomes a critical site for socio-political contestation. Through the practice of placing their graphic messages on Oaxaca's city walls, ASARO artists are giving visual representation to the historical and systemic marginalization of the Oaxacan people, as well as the people's courage in mobilizing to find a solution. By manipulating public space, the artists are in direct engagement and dialogue with all of Oaxaca's public. Speaking from the perspective of shared experiences and struggles, ASARO's images reveal common points of identification that can work to produce the collective subject of *el pueblo*.

2.3 What Power does Art hold in Social Mobilization?

Throughout the streets of Oaxaca, artists recognize the distinct power of their artwork to engage the public in important debates. They are not alone in recognizing the potential influences of art in the public sphere. In the second half of the 20th century, artists throughout Europe and the Americas began to actively challenge the conception that artistic authenticity is

dependent upon social isolation (Walker 1995). Artists realized that they could actively and positively challenge unequal power structures that they saw throughout society. During this time, artists began to contest the credibility of areas of the artistic establishment, including galleries and museums, to which only a privileged few could gain access. The public engagement of the artwork and philosophy of artists such as Britain's John Latham and Germany's Joseph de Beuys, are said to have inspired this shift in artistic focus from the private to the public sphere. Beuys' belief in theory and practice encouraged artists to view art as having the potential to positively impact social order and enrich human life (Thistlewood 1995: 185). Beuys firmly believed in the need for artists to focus on the public (Domizio Durini 1997: 81). He wanted to inspire others to realize that "everyone is an artist" and that they had the potential to play a direct role in transforming society for the best (De Duve 2007: 189). According to Beuys, sociopolitical engagement and art practice cannot be distinguished. Many contemporary artists are also inspired by the work and ideas of John Latham, one of Beuys' contemporaries. Early socially and politically focused artists, such as Latham and Beuys, viewed art as having the possibility to be engaged with the perceptions and desires of society at large. In order to achieve this social engagement, artists began to look out to the public, and break from the past norms of making art separate from society in the confines of their traditional studio (Tung 2013:17).

Like Latham and Beuys, members of Oaxaca's street art movement are firm believers that art belongs in the public sphere where it can spark debate and dialogue. Suzanna Lacy (1995) refers to this movement towards the production and curating of public artwork as the "new genre public art". Lacy (2008) describes the primary goal of this new genre of public art as public engagement. This commitment to addressing the public is defined in many ways including as dialogical art practice, civil art, community based art, socially engaged art, relational

aesthetics, and art in the public sphere (Lacy 2008: 19). According to Lacy, in recent years there is an increasing "worldwide exchange of practices, engagement from various theoretical perspectives and blurred lines between field – and museum-based practices" (Lacy 2008: 19). Along these lines, Grant Kester (2004: 9) demonstrates how collaborative and interactive art initiatives that are oriented towards the general public and not towards gallery spaces, can be viewed from a philosophical perspective as “linking new forms of intersubjective experience with social or political activism”. Kester (2004) argues that these dialogical esthetics need to be seen as a mode of practice and perception that facilitates dialogue and exchange. Community-based and socially engaged artistic practices provide the perfect platform for generating these sorts of conversations and exchanges. Engaging with local communities to produce art is believed to encourage critical interpretations and dialogues of the prevailing socio-political reality. Publically engaged art is seen as much more relevant to questions, critiques, and commentaries about current day societal issues than art that is produced within the confines of the art studio, or conventional white cube spaces such as museums and galleries. By shifting the ground of artistic production in a way that makes art more public and accessible, Oaxaca’s artists can speak out about changing political, social, and cultural situations around them through direct engagement with the public.

Due to the potential power that public art can possess when used strategically, it holds the potential to contribute in many positive ways to social movements like those occurring in Oaxaca. Works of art can be used to generate “ideas about leadership, bravery, cowardice, altruism, dangers, authority, and fantasies about the future that people typically assume to be reflections of their own observations and reasoning.” (Edelman 1995:2). Various forms of art yield political power that can work as an emancipatory force that challenges dominant

institutions and existing systems (Pratt 1992). Art in the public sphere may shape ideas and political behavior (Chaffe 1993; Edelman 1995; Eyerman and Jamison 1998). In his analysis of street art, Sheng Kuan Chung (2009) examines how the inherent power of graffiti culture can help youth make deep connections and gain different perspectives on issues in their lives and the lives of others around them. Street art can also teach youth unique techniques for raising important social concerns or questioning the dominant social practice of their society.

Scholars suggest that social movements use the medium of artistic expression for many varied reasons. First, art can be useful in communicating with the larger society (Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Kaplan 1992; Neustadter 1992), as well as for communicating internally with a movement's members (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). Second, art can help mobilize the public around a certain cause (Chaffe 1993; Denisoff 1983; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Garofalo 1992; Pratt 1992). It does so by raising consciousness and awareness in potential recruits in the public (Chaffe 1993; Denisoff 1983; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Garofalo 1992). Art also provides emotional messages (Jasper 1998), reinforces the values of those who are active supporters of social movements (Denisoff 1983) and provides reassurance that social and political change is accomplishable (Staggenborg et al. 1993–1994). In doing so, art also keeps members of a social movement active and committed to that movement (Chaffe 1993:16; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Jasper 1998; Sanger 1997). This sustained commitment is especially true when movements, like those in Oaxaca, apply collective art-making techniques. Collective art encourages people to develop stronger bonds with other movement members (Jasper 1997:193; Pratt 1992). In effect, art helps to motivate people to stay active in movements by fostering a feeling of group unity and collective identity (Falasca-Zamponi 1997:5; Jasper 1998; Pratt 1992;

Sanger 1997). Art also offers social movements important avenues for generating resources for their movements (Sanger 1997).

Finally, art in Oaxaca proves to be effective as an oppositional tool in a society that is governed by a long history of authoritarian regimes. Art can represent the center around which an oppositional voice is created (Adams 2002: 28; Chaffe 1993:16; Vila 1992). Artistic expression can express meanings and values that subtly shape behavior. Slowly, these meanings and values will lead to the breakdown of oppressive regimes (Adams 2002: 29; Wicke 1992).

According to Lyman Chaffe (1993:30) street art, under authoritarian regimes,

connotes an activist, collective sense... art becomes a form of psychological warfare against the dominant culture and elites and reveals an emerging subterranean movement. This psychological effect becomes threatening as it connotes a prelude to an organized opposition or the existence of one...the act symbolizes that a culture of resistance exists that dictators pretend to ignore.

Public art can indicate, especially to those that are not involved in the movement, that an active and organized opposition exists. Public art can break the complicity of silence in oppressive social environments (Adams 2002: 29; Chaffe 1993). More and more, contemporary artists are intentionally blurring the lines between life and art (Hickman 2005; Rose 2003). Many artists, including those in Oaxaca, are situating their work in publicly accessible social settings (Congdon 2004; Kwon 2004). The work of artists is moving outside the restricted centers of artistic exhibits, such as museums and galleries, and is moving into the everyday spaces of daily life experiences. This establishes more direct contact with an audience, and subsequently, with the flow and character of social life (Richardson 2010). Art, in its various forms, has long been an essential element of social movements because of its ability to help facilitate shifts in culture. Art's role in activism includes the communication of a movement's values, goals, and beliefs, the expression of collective identity and solidarity, and the facilitation of dialogue between the

movement and the broader public. The influences of art can work toward empowering a public to transform oppressive conditions (Eyerman and Jamison 1995; Jasper 1997; Kester 2004).

2.4 How does Populism Function in Oaxaca?

The actions of Oaxaca's artists can be framed through debates and discourses on the role and form of populism in Latin America. The study of populism is supported by an extensive and broad amount of literature that struggles to come up with a unified and standard approach to analyzing populist movements (Hawkins, 2010). Ernesto Laclau's (1977) discursive theory of populism argues that the peculiarity of populist discourse is to frame politics as an antagonistic confrontation between *el pueblo* and the oligarchy. In *On Populism*, Laclau (1977:165) states that

despite the wide diversity in the uses of the term, we find in all of them the common reference to an analogical basis which is the people. [...] it is certainly true that reference to the people occupies a central place in populism.

However, the use of language such as *el pueblo* is not enough to define a specific movement as using a populist discourse. As Laclau himself argued, "the presence of popular elements in a discourse is not sufficient to transform it into a populist one. Populism starts at the point where popular, democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc" (Laclau in Stavrakakis, 2004:254). In slight contrast to Laclau, Hawkins (2010:33) identifies five elements of populist discourse: "a Manichaean outlook; identification of Good with the will of *el pueblo*; identification of Evil with a conspiring elite; and two corollary elements: an emphasis on systematic change and an anything-goes attitude toward minority rights and democratic procedure". Hawkins' recognition of a populist movement's need for systematic change proves valuable for theorizing the mobilization, actions and goals of widespread change that artists in Oaxaca hold.

While populism can be defined as an “appeal” (Canovan, 2002), a “political style” (Knight, 1998), a “language” (Kazin, 1998), a “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004), or a “discourse” (de la Torre, 2000; Laclau, 2005; Panizza, 2005), for the purposes of this project I employ Hawkins’ (2010) definition of populism as a discourse. In his work Hawkins (2010:5) contends that

populism is a set of fundamental beliefs about the nature of the political world – a worldview or, to use a more rarefied term, a ‘discourse’ – that perceives history as a Manichean struggle between Good and Evil, one in which the side of the Good is ‘the will of the people’, or the natural, common interest of the citizens once they are allowed to form their own opinions, while the side of Evil is a conspiring elite that has subverted his will.

This definition proves especially relevant to the ideas and ideals of populism expressed by Oaxaca’s urban street artists and their constant use of the language, “el pueblo”. Central to this thesis is the discussion of how artists’ work focuses around constructing a bottom-up, grassroots definition of el pueblo that inspires people into collective action.

The urban art movement in Oaxaca is a part of a larger grassroots populist movement that is moving through parts of southern Mexico fighting for systematic change. Following a grassroots populist framework, this thesis argues against the universalistic claims that define populism as “the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo, or ‘the people’” (Roberts 2007:5). Such definitions illustrate populism in the form of a personalistic leader portraying an alternative route with an entity called “the people,” mobilized against the establishment. In Oaxaca’s movement, there is no personalistic leader and a strong emphasis is put on the collective community of the movement- it is the people who represent and speak for themselves.

The urban street artists in Oaxaca are actively mobilizing el pueblo through the images and messages portrayed through their artwork in public spaces. Art's ability to inspire onlookers to question the status quo and break hegemonic representations of society proves especially valuable for social activism and mobilization. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which art has the potential to do much more than simply bolster the privilege and prestige of the elites. It holds the power to challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture of the group in power. Because hegemonic cultures are constantly being redefined and restructured, they are vulnerable to counterhegemonic alternatives that are proposed by grassroots populist movements. Artists in Oaxaca especially hold the power and ability to influence the values and perceptions of a society and challenge the hegemony of state power. In Oaxaca's popular movement, the work of artists helps construct the shared consciousness and identity that motivates people to mobilize behind a common value, idea, belief, or cause. The artists create their artwork with the final aim of bringing about positive and constructive changes in their society and empowering other Oaxacans to do the same.

3 METHODS

3.1 Personal Identity and Research Experience

I first traveled to Oaxaca City in the summer of 2009 with anthropologist Stefano Varese, a professor from University of California- Berkeley. Instantaneously, I fell in love with the city. Oaxaca is a region full of culture and diversity. Known for its indigenous roots, Oaxaca is home to over 16 different indigenous languages and a plethora of indigenous traditions. While the city's unique mixture of ingenious tradition and colonial history undoubtedly creates a breathtaking cityscape, it also marks over 500 years of exploitation, oppression, and resistance and rebellion. It is undeniable that the State of Oaxaca has a distinguished history of social movements, particularly during the last three decades of the 20th century into the beginning of the 21st century.

I first met the artists of ASARO in January of 2014 when I happened to stumble into their *Espacio Zapata* workshop located on Porfirio Diaz Street, in the center of Oaxaca City. I was attracted into the workshop by the intricate graffiti images that filled the walls outside of the space. When I entered the workshop, I was enthusiastically greeted by Mario. He explained to me the basic mission and projects of ASARO and gave me a tour of the artwork hanging on the gallery walls. I was instantaneously intrigued by the work and organization of the artists' collective. From this point on I started to follow the actions and projects of ASARO on their Facebook page and began to develop personal friendships with members of the group. While in the United States, I actively participated in online discussions and postings by ASARO members on the group's Facebook page. When I returned to Mexico for my research in the summer of

2015, many of the artists whom I did not previously meet recognized my face from my Facebook profile and commented that they already felt like they knew me for a long time.



Image 3: Outside entrance of ASARO's workshop, Espacio Zapata located on calle Porfirio Diaz. Photo by author.

Throughout the entire process of field work for this research, I was constantly reminded of my *gringa* (American) and *guera* (white) background despite my best attempts to minimize the apparent racial, ethnic, social, and economic differences between members of ASARO and me. Being white and from the United States made initial contact with my research participants somewhat strained. Negative perceptions of Americans, especially those from upper middle class white backgrounds, as myself, made the process of building a rapport and gaining the trust with research participants difficult. Not only was I not Mexican or Mexican-American, but I was a middle-class, white, American - far removed from the culture and harsh realities of everyday life in Mexico. When I first met my Oaxacan friends, they would ask how much I paid for my apartment. I was quick to tell them at first, excited that it cost less than half of what I was paying in Atlanta, but their quick reaction of “oh my god that’s a lot” or “wow Liz, I can get you a room with my cousin for half of that” quickly killed my enthusiasm. As much as I tried to minimize

the economic and power disparities between my participants and myself, I could not mask the fact that my apartment, in a nice, safe, and residential part of town within walking distance of the city center, cost more a month than what the majority of my participants made in two months.

In addition, in a country like Mexico where the majority of its wealthiest citizens appear “whiter” than the majority of the country’s “mixed” mestizo and indigenous citizens, my white identity alone gave me certain social capital that a person of color from the United States from the same economic background as myself would not have experienced. Mexico is a nation with a deep rooted history of racism, structured around colonial policies that categorized and created a hierarchy of people based on varying shades of their skin. In this racial cast system, brown and black skin was always framed as inferior to whiter shades of skin tone. Following Mexican independence, and continuing through the post revolution period, Mexico’s nation-building campaign was structured around Mexico’s mixed Spanish and indigenous national identity. This cosmic race (see Vasconcelos 1925) became a way for Mexican elites to unify a diverse populace under a unified mixed racial identity. While this rhetoric hails Mexico’s indigenous roots and ancestry as a point of national pride, it masks blatant discrimination and racism towards current day indigenous populations which are framed as backwards and unmodern. Despite the many forms of discrimination towards people with indigenous backgrounds, the majority of my research participants self-identified as having indigenous roots and found their artistic inspiration from this ancestry. Much of their work was aimed at challenging the esthetic discourses that marked darker, indigenous skin tones as a marker of backwardness, un-modernity, and inferiority. During the many conversations I had with local artists on race and racism, I oftentimes found myself feeling out of place. It was hard to be white while a room filled with my indigenous and mixed mestizo friends discussed white privilege and the economic disparities

between races and ethnicities in Mexico. It was clear that my Oaxacan friends picked up on my unease during many of these discussions. They often tried to reassure me by insisting that I “was not your typical white person” and that if “more people (white) were like me, the world would be a much different place”. Despite their best attempts, I could not help but feel guilty about the powerful economic and cultural capital that being white afforded me.

Many of the artists that I worked with made it a point to explicate and reiterate multiple times the differences between life in Mexico and life in the United States - in case I was unaware of my fortunate background and the infinite opportunities that it gives me. At almost all of the events I attended, I was one of the few non-Mexicans in the group. All other foreigners seemed to be from other parts of Latin America or from Europe. Little by little, after proving that I was willing and able to endure the hot hours working in the Oaxacan sun and surprising everyone with my deep knowledge of Mexican history, politics, culture and fluency in Spanish, people began to feel comfortable and at ease with my presence and participation.

During the course of research, I was often asked why I cared about the history and struggles of those in Oaxaca. One interviewee even commented quite directly

“why are our problems and struggles important to you, Eli? You are so far removed from these problems and worries in the United States. When have you ever had to worry about walking two hours every day to get to school, gone more than a few hours without a meal, or lacked access to clean water? Even worse, when have you ever feared that because one day you speak up for what you believe in, the next day you can be disappeared – without anyone besides your family blinking an eye? When have you ever feared, like real fear, the police and your own government?”

He was right. I never had and probably never will experience any of these things. So why did I choose to conduct this research project? As I explained to my participants, I felt, and still feel, a sense of solidarity with the people and artists of Oaxaca. Not only did I find their story and

current activities inspirational, but stressed my belief that in today's globalized world, we are all closely connected to one another. Oaxaca's struggles cannot be separated from the actions and lives of those throughout the world, especially the United States. U.S. policies such as The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) - which has flooded Mexican markets with cheap subsidized corn, have had disastrous economic and social effects in states like Oaxaca where corn production represents the staple livelihood for the State's majority rural populations.

3.2 Methodological Approach:

During the research for this project, which was carried out in the city of Oaxaca over 12 weeks during the summer of 2015, I utilized ethnographic methods including interviews and participant observation. After receiving proper University Internal Review Board (IRB) approval to begin my research project, I gained contact with the members of Oaxaca's local art movements through communication using their social media outlets. Rational and critical discussion between ordinary citizens on public matters is essential to the public sphere, and today the media provides the primary spaces for such discussion (Butsch 2007). Newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet, all manipulated the abilities of citizens' engagement in the public sphere on different communicative levels (ibid). The relationship between the media and social movements are of critical importance especially in the organization and activism of Oaxacan street artists who are very active on social media.

Recently, social media has gained more attention for the role it can play in facilitating protest and spreading important information (Tucker 2014). In addition to providing information about the protests, social media might affect people's motivation to participate in the protest. This could be done in many ways including: triggering feelings of group identity (e.g., the many references seen to "black lives matter" in tweets regarding the Ferguson protests), feelings of

injustice, and emotions such as anger (Tucker 2014). Social media creates massive networks that not only connect the entire world, but also give people the ability to easily publicize opinions at a low cost, and to the speed and scale of group coordination (Rohr Lopes:10). It also provides new sources of information that cannot be easily controlled by authoritarian regimes (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). In places like Oaxaca, the State which is accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech now finds itself called to account for inconsistencies between its view of events and the public's. Both censorship and propaganda cannot be completely effective in silencing citizens with access to social media (Shirky 2011).

As places across the world have their own popular mobilization experiences broadcasted on social media sites, information spreads throughout the world faster than other media sources are able to keep up with (Serafeim 2012). With so many benefits, these new tools found in social media act as a catalyst for popular movements around the world (Ozalp 2013). Due to these potential benefits, various Oaxacan art collectives are active in posting videos, photos, and commentaries about their recent and upcoming projects on their Facebook pages. Throughout all of the fieldwork process, social media presence proved to be a useful tool for communicating with and following the current actions and discourses of the groups. I utilized the Facebook page of ASARO to make initial contact with members of the movement, and to follow their projects and organizing efforts. Social media contact allowed me to start building relationships with artists before arriving in Oaxaca.

Artists' consistent postings and commentaries on minute to minute events happening throughout Oaxaca and all of Mexico gave me important insights into how the artists were organized and what topics and themes were most important to them. I found social media outlets an interesting space to examine how the artists marketed themselves, their artwork, and their

social struggles to worldwide audiences. Many of the artists with whom I worked viewed social media as a safe space where they could anonymously (through secondary Facebook accounts under their street names) and freely share their art and activism without the threat of police and government retaliation. Within social media spaces, many of the artists shared what they no longer felt safe sharing on the streets, or used social media outlets as a means to share and preserve their artwork on the streets. The majority of artwork that was produced clandestinely on public walls and spaces did not last long amounts of time on the street before being torn down or painted over. However, the artist's ability to take a photo of their work and share it worldwide was a way for them to preserve the social and political power of their art.

1.1.1 Participant Observation

Once I arrived in Oaxaca, I attended numerous gallery exhibits and workshops hosted by the artist collective, ASARO (Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca). I also spent hours just observing the day-to-day happenings at *Espacio Zapata*, ASARO's workshop space in the center of the city. During this time, I conducted participant observation and learned the processes of *arte grabado* (print art) including woodblock, metal carvings, linoleum prints, and stencil - the most popular types found in the Oaxacan art collectives. During these observations, I was able to gain key insights into the overall structure, operation, discussions, and functions of these important cultural spaces. When possible, I also signed up to participate in many of the workshops offered by the artist collective. During these events I learned hands on how to produce some of the more popular forms of *arte grabado*- including stencil and linoleum prints, as well as was able to observe how the artists taught and marketed their artistic techniques to the broader community. Getting to experience the creative process by actively participating in creative projects is not a new method for anthropologists working with artists (see Schneider and

Wright 2010). Directly participating in the creative process gave me experiences and insights that simply standing in the corner observing would have not allowed. This included a fuller understanding of the smells, textures and sounds of art production that artists explained as therapeutic. Directly participating in the art production also allowed me to develop a deeper collaboration with local artists, and strengthened our relationships and their trust in me by minimalizing the oftentimes too obvious dichotomy and power relations between the researcher and the research participants.

Participant observation in the collectives also allowed me to participate in the creative and interactive process of creating and envisioning new artistic projects. Not only was I able to directly participate in the creating and diffusing of the art, but I was also able to observe and participate in important political, economic, social and cultural discussions that surfaced daily in the artists' workshop. These casual and organic talks occurred as daily news and events flowed into the workshop walls. Within the small space of their workshop, the artists organically processed and discussed the new information. Oftentimes a simple conversation over a recent event morphed into a new project idea or event. Participant observation allowed me to experience first-hand and participate, by asking questions, in the creative and social process of producing the artwork - not just the final work hanging on the wall or posted on the street. Through the use of participant observation, it became clear that arte grabado in Oaxaca is just as much about community and comradery, as it is about the artwork produced.

In addition to participant observation within the artistic collective of ASARO, I also spent time walking around the streets of Oaxaca observing the ways passersby interacted with the artwork. I spent many hours out on the street observing people passing by some of the large murals created by the artists. In many cases, a passerby would stop to take in and process the

artwork and even ask the artists questions about their art. These interactions shed important light on the relationship between the artists groups and other members of the public. Additionally, because arte grabado can be printed over and over again, it became fascinating to trace and follow the different and sifting public locations of various artworks. The back and forth dialogue between the artists and censorship shed important light on the political and social power of such artwork.

1.1.2 Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with active members of Oaxaca's art collectives. Since the majority of active members of the street art movement are male, seven of my interviews were with males between the age of 19 and 38 and only three were with women between the age of 22 and 29. All of the participants were actively involved in the street art movement and most were teenagers or young adults when the tumultuous event of the 2006 Oaxaca uprising took place. They found themselves politicized during the movement and inspired to take action through artistic expression. Although the majority of my research participants identified themselves as having indigenous backgrounds, their actual demographic profiles differed quite significantly. While some members of ASARO hold degrees in higher education, others never graduated the equivalent of high school. Four of the men interviewed and two of the women were from urban middle class backgrounds and had a high degree in arts from the local Benito Juarez public university. They used their artistic talents not only in their roles in ASARO, but as a means to make a living as well. A handful of ASARO members have their own galleries where they sell their artwork to tourists, while other members make their living as photographers for local newspapers or event services. Often times, members

of the collective are solicited to create large public murals for both public and private institutions.

With the consent of these participants, all of the interviews were audio recorded and photographs were taken of some of the artists' artwork. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to two hours and covered a variety of topics dependent upon each participant's background and personal interests. The interviews covered a variety of topics that helped me gain a deeper understanding of the background, motivations and experiences of the artists involved in the urban art movement. Conducting these interviews allowed me to cover important topics such as, what originally motivated/inspired them to get involved with Oaxaca's urban art movement? How did they join? What do they see as the main goals and objectives of the movement? What are the social, political, and economic events that motivated members of Oaxaca's art collectives to produce street art clandestinely? What do they get out of producing such art? Where do these images come from and what inspires them? How do they justify their actions, and how do they rationalize their use of public space as canvas for their artwork and its subsequent message? What do they gain/wish to achieve through their artwork? Is there a certain message that they want their artwork to display? What identity and solidarity is created through their artistic activities? And finally, more generally, how has membership in ASARO changed/influenced their life?

Asking such questions allowed me to gain further insight into who the actors were who were involved in the urban art movement in Oaxaca. Through the use of interview, I was able to discover common events, experiences, ideologies, backgrounds, and viewpoints that the artists shared. The interview process highlighted the common sentiment shared by the majority of artists: that graphic art in Oaxaca was something special and unique to the region. It also

supplemented and enriched much of the data collected during participant observation, and put stories and experiences into the artwork I examined. It proved impossible to fully understand the work of art being created without first understanding the unique history, experience, and identity of its creator. The interview process gave me a more nuanced understanding of the motivations, ideologies, and autobiographical nature of the artwork produced.

1.1.3 Participant Safety and Wellbeing

Much of the artwork produced by the artists is overtly political and offers strong critiques of local and national political figures. As a result, the interviews covered many topics that could be politically sensitive in nature. Due to the sensitive political nature of many of the issues that were discussed, great care was taken to protect the identity and confidentiality of all of my informants. Interview transcripts and notes were kept on a password protected computer and pseudonyms are used throughout this entire thesis, unless the participant specifically expressed the desire to use their real name or street name. All of the artwork photographed and collected during interviews was stored separate from the interviews themselves and was also given a code that signified which participant the images belonged to. The key to these codes, along with the key to participants' pseudonyms, were stored in a password protected computer file. Great care was taken during the research phase of the project to ensure that none of the artists' true identities could be connected back to their involvement in Oaxaca's social movements, nor the artwork that they produce in conjunction with their participation and role in protest movements.

In a similar fashion, during the write up process great care was also taken to protect the identity and safety of all my participants. Due to the sensitivity of much of the artwork that artists produced, the possibility of their real identity being exposed was a constant concern of mine. The majority of my informants signed their artwork under two different names and

identities - depending on the intended use of the artwork. Artwork that was intended for the gallery wall or official and approved spaces was commonly signed with the artist's real name. Whereas artwork published clandestinely in unapproved spaces was signed with an artist's street name or simply with the collective's name. Many of my research participants were active in the local professional art scene and some were well known, nationally and worldwide, for their artwork produced for galleries and exhibits.

Due to this notoriety, my participants' biographical background and stories had the potential to give away their true identities - even when using pseudonyms. To protect my subjects during the write up process, all specific biographical information that could connect a certain artist to their street name was removed and overtly left out of the ethnography. This information included details such as schools that they attended, where they grew up, artwork/exhibits that they created, and exact titles or roles they have had in organizations and movements. Removing this personal information during the write up process ensured that I actively protected the identities of my informants. If I had left in specific biographical information, my informants could have been connected to their artwork and activism-thus potentially putting them in danger. To further ensure the safety of my informants, all photos used throughout this project are not connected to their creators- unless I was specifically given permission to do so. Photos are used only as visual examples to supplement the text. Specific details about their creation and their creators are not included. Taking these measures ensures that photographs cannot be connected to individual participants in my research. Adhering to the methodological procedures listed above allowed me to successfully conduct ethnographic research that held the wellbeing and safety of my participants to the highest degree.

4 *Arte pa'l Pueblo*: ASARO's Artistic Revolution

We use “arte pa'l pueblo” (Art for the people) since the social movement in 2006. While our language is undeniably western in origin, I think we have a different definition of Art. Art is something that every individual gives meaning to- and that's what's important. For me, art is important to communicate with society- the marginalized society- who are our neighbors. We walk pass them every day on the street. The humble working people, not the rich. The rich exploit- while it is the humble people that make things happen. It is these people that make up the pueblo. My art is meant to speak to us- collectively as a pueblo. It gives me a way to translate my history, perspective, and social grievances into creative visual exchanges with others throughout Oaxaca.

-Anonymous Artist.

As the birthplace of Mexico's only indigenous president, Benito Juarez, Oaxaca is recognized for its indigenous ancestry and current day indigenous communities, known as *pueblos*. While there are officially 16 indigenous groups in Oaxaca, every group actually has hundreds of subgroups, each distinguished by unique linguistic and social traditions. Oaxaca, like the nearby states of Guerrero and Chiapas, contains a startlingly diverse range of indigenous cultures with roots that reach back many centuries. About 33 percent of Oaxaca's 3.5 million inhabitants are indigenous according to the 2005 population counts (INEGI 2006). Oaxaca's capital city is a diverse melting pot of indigenous Mexican, mestizo (mixed race) Mexicans, and Mexicans of European background. Although the state of Oaxaca is internationally renowned for both its cultural heritage and natural beauty, Oaxaca consistently ranks, along with Chiapas and Guerrero, as one of the three most marginalized Mexican states (see CONAPO 2006). Some studies estimate that the number of people living in extreme poverty in the state of Oaxaca is as high as 78 percent (Thomas 2006).

Despite Oaxaca's heterogeneity, Oaxaca is often framed by State and tourist imaginaries as a homogeneous indigenous region with little interstate diversity. Oaxaca is "imagineered" (Rutheiser 1999) by those in power as a colonial exemplar of Mexico's indigeneity in need of preservation. Oaxaca's unique heritage is marketed to tourists from all nationalities as a seemingly authentic convergence of cultures from past and present. The images of Oaxacans produced by state narratives present them as dressed in colorful and intricately woven costumes-stuck in an ancient world with unmodern traditions. By actively promoting the folkloric characteristics of Oaxaca's population, state imaginaries of Oaxaca continue a longstanding political strategy that erase the daily struggles of the region's marginalized majority, promoting them as specimens of Oaxacan tradition, but not as active political subjects (Poole 2004).

4.1 2006 Oaxacan Social Movement

Authoritarian politics, poverty, and social protests have been regular facets of Oaxaca's historical trajectory. Previous social movements in Oaxaca resulted in the ousting of three past Oaxacan governors including Edmundo Sánchez Cano in 1946, Manuel Mayoral Heredia in 1952, and Manuel Zarate Aquino in 1977 (see Stephen 2013). Continuing with this tradition, in May of 2006, Oaxaca's teachers union took over the *zócalo*, or main plaza of the city to hold a *plantón*, or sit-in strike. With over 70,000 members in the teachers union and the power to close down schools across the state, the union has found these work stoppages and sit-in strikes to be effective tools in gaining political traction vis-à-vis the state. For over 30 years, the union has annually used the practice of seizing the square to get the government's attention to deficiencies in schools and the needs of teachers and students. While these strikes are typically resolved through mutual negotiations, in the early morning hours of June 14, 2006, Oaxacan governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz deployed from 1,000 to 3,000 federal police to break up the *plantón*. The

police began attacking the protesting teachers and their supporters with tear gas and other forms of violence. This violence only instigated teachers and angered bystanders and witnesses to mobilize against the police (See Davies 2007).



Figure 4 A Protestor spray paints “asesinos” (assassins) in front of a line of Federal Riot Police. During the 2006 movement graphic art and messages played a prominent role in the mobilization and communication of APPO. Photo by Francisco Leonardo Reséndiz

The events that unfolded in the summer of 2006 played a pivotal role in the birth of Oaxaca’s organized street art movement. During this time, Oaxaca de Juarez, the capital city of Oaxaca, Mexico became the hotbed of political unrest in the country. In just one day, over 90 people were injured and four unarmed teachers were killed. Caught by surprise, the teachers who had scattered regrouped in the streets around the square and retook the plaza that morning. The killing and violence did not end there. Everyday more and more members of the resistance were brutally beaten and many were disappeared. A few months later, Brad Will, a human rights journalist from New York City was shot and killed by riot police while documenting the rights

abuses committed by the Federal Police. The killing of Will represented the final straw for the residents of Oaxaca. Shocked at the news of what occurred, city residents of all backgrounds mobilized in solidarity with the teachers and raised barricades against the police (see de Aguinaga 2007).



Image 5: A spray-painted bus is used as a barricade during the 2006 popular uprising. Photo by Francisco Reséndiz.

What began as a teachers strike, rapidly became the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), a broader populist movement including students, farm-workers, multiple indigenous groups, as well as over 300 social and civic organizations spanning a gamut of causes from environmental to human rights, and an array of social actors ranging from dedicated anarchists and devout church groups to committed socialists. While the social movement that coalesced around APPO was ultimately unable to achieve the removal of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the scale and

scope of the social movement was unprecedented. In a state of almost 3.5 million people, APPO mobilized over one million Oaxacans against the authoritarian practices of Oaxaca's governor in 2006 through marches, assemblies, barricades, and street art (Stephen 2013).



Image 6: ASARO Image depicting the events of 2006 and calling into attention the failure of all political parties within Mexico to represent the Oaxacan people. The shields of the federal police are inscribed with the acronyms of Mexico's political parties. Photo by ASARO.

The rebellion shut down and took over the city center (Zócalo), important government buildings, the Benito Juárez Autonomous University, as well as the radio station. Government repression and corruption united the citizenry of Oaxaca and inspired a diverse collective resistance that was comprised of indigenous organizations, women's groups, rural workers, religious activists, students, human rights organizations, as well as a collective of artists – who would eventually become ASARO (see Denham 2008). During the time of this rebellion, street

art was used to condemn the abuses of power that had become so prevalent in the troubled state, and to publicly point to a shared reality of oppression. Art was a universally accessible and easy way for people to share information, rally support, and visually demonstrate their common identity as Oaxacans.

4.2 Birth of ASARO in 2006

During the six months that the city of Oaxaca was under control of the popular movement, members of ASARO organized to create graphic messages to unite the people throughout the movement. In addition to the movement's control over the local radio station, art represented an important means of communication for expressing the plan and presence of the movement. This art became known as *Arte pa'l Pueblo* (Art for the pueblo). Government buildings that the movement occupied were symbolically tagged as belonging to the movement, and most walls in the downtown area became public galleries. As the work of the artist collectives in Oaxaca suggest, there are blaring inconsistencies between the states' manufactured rustic images and the actual experience of Oaxaca's people. According to ASARO member Andrea who joined the movement during the 2006 rebellion and continues to play an active role in ASARO's day to day activities,

the people of Oaxaca are represented by outsiders throughout Mexico as somewhat savage. Mass media does not reveal the truth about who we really are - it is always disguised by their depiction of us dressed in our bright colors - they sell this image. It is a way for them [the state] to make money. It is a blatant form of exploiting this image of our state. The events that happened in 2006 were simply a culmination of over 500 years of Oaxacans' exploitation and marginalization by those in power.

In stenciling their graphic messages on public spaces throughout the city, street artists gave visual form to a long history of systemic marginalization. The drawings hailed the Oaxacan people's courage in mobilizing together to find a solution.



Image 7: Example of street art from the 2006 uprising that encouraged a unified Oaxacan mobilization. This depicts Governor Ortiz as Hitler and reads "Oaxaca para the Oaxacans" (Oaxaca for the Oaxacans). Photo by Iván Arenas.

Through highlighting common points of identity and shared experiences, the images on the wall united large populations of Oaxacans. Art strategically integrated Oaxacans under the singular term, *el pueblo* (the town), and reminded the public of their need to mobilize together. According to Mario, who was one of the founding members of the movement, “ASARO began in 2006 with the political turmoil in Oaxaca...we believed that ASARO could play a crucial role in which art and different kinds of artist’s expression could support and enhance the social movement.” The ASARO artists were responsible for producing key cultural icons for the movement - the majority of which continue to be important symbols and evoke powerful reminders of the continuity of the Oaxacan people’s social movement. According to one ASARO member who played a pivotal role in the artistic revolution of APPO, “in 2006, many of us [artists] were employed by the people to do the dirty work. We were young anarch-punks and they gave us spray-paint cans while others were given Molotov cocktails”.



Image 8: Stencil Image glorifying the role of women in the fight to take over the university radio station. The writing on the stencil reads "Get out Federal Police" and the additional writing "All of the power to the people" Photo by Author.

One of these major icons was *La Virgen de las Barrikadas* (The Virgin of the Barricades). This image was widely disseminated within the movement and was built on popular religiosity and the importance of the icon of the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexican culture (Stephen 2013). Harnessing popular religion through their artwork allowed ASARO to create unity out of difference. The Virgen of the Barrikadas was a symbol that all Oaxacans, regardless of their backgrounds, could rally behind and find meaning in. The icon also gives religious legitimacy to the efforts of many Oaxacans who guarded the barricades and kept the federal police from passing. Life on the barricades was not safe. The lives of those involved were constantly in danger. People felt protected and guarded by the Virgen.

As the protector of the barricades, the Virgen is often depicted wearing a gas mask or a red bandana and wearing a cloak of burning tires - all important elements from the barricades. The original image of the Virgen carried the slogan, "Protect us Holy Virgin of the Barricades". Important to note is the deliberate misspelling of "barricadas" as "Barrikadas". The deliberate and stylized misspelling further underscores the theme of resistance in its neglect of proper orthography. It is meant as a way to make the image relevant to members of the pueblo

regardless of educational backgrounds. Today the image of the Virgen de las Barrikadas continues to appear in marches and demonstrations throughout Oaxaca demonstrating how this artistic creation creates social memory and links past events with today's struggles.



Image 9: Wheatpaste of the Virgin of the Barricades with the iconic gasmask, burning tire cloak and intentional misspelling. Photo by Author.

When asked why they did not copyright the image, the members of ASARO responsible for its creation responded that “it belongs to everyone, even though we created it”. In reminiscing about his influence during the 2006 popular uprising, an ASARO artists commented to me that their influence throughout the city was contagious- “It was awesome. It would have been one thing if we were the only ones writing “*Fuera URO*” (get out Ruiz Ortiz) but you could see the same phrase and images tagged everywhere. Our images and message belonged to the people to use where they saw fit and appropriate.” ASARO believes that it is their responsibility to never let the people forget about what the pueblo is possible of achieving when they come together under a united cause like they did during the 2006 uprisings.

During annual teachers’ protests, the symbol of the virgin of the barricades continues to occupy the flags, banners, and city walls. As we walked through the city streets together,

Marcos, an ASARO member, commented to me with a smile on his face his satisfaction that the image was still being evoked in Oaxaca's social protests. "This is not our artwork" he explained to me. "It is now in the hands of the people. They are responsible for giving it meaning and purpose. This is why I do what I do. This image lives on long after 2006 and it continues to remind and inspire Oaxacans." The popular uprising helped to forge a strong shared experience and identity for many young Oaxacan artists and continues to influence the way they perceive and interact with the society they live in, as well as the artwork they produce. The events of 2006 continue to inspire and fill the collective memory of those involved in today's art collectives.



Image 10: Post 2006 Stencil of the Virgin of the Barricades wearing the symbolic red bandanna over her face. Photo by Author.

4.3 ASARO Today

On any given day at ASARO's Espacio Zapata workshop and gallery, you can expect to come into contact with at least five or six different ASARO members or other artists or activists

from around Oaxaca. Upon walking into the workshop, you are greeted by a distinct mixture of sights, smells, and sounds. Every inch of the workshop's walls are covered with artwork produced by the collective's members, various clothing and merchandise for sale, and photos. The main room, following the entrance, is dedicated as gallery space for each month's thematic exhibit. The adjacent room, behind the gallery space, is filled with various printing presses and piles and piles of completed prints and print molds. In the center of the room is a large wood work table that is covered in years of accumulated paint splatters. In the corner of the room is a large drying rack that seemed to always be filled with new prints. Another small room off the entrance to the workshop holds more printing machines and small tables where I typically found ASARO members working on sketches and designs, or watching online art technique demonstrations on YouTube. On a quiet day, one would find an artist quietly working at one of the tables with headphones on, using a variety of different shaped knives and materials to carve a new woodblock print or using one of the presses to re-create an old print. In a final room adjacent to the back room, is where ASARO member Eduardo runs his small five table eatery. When he is cooking, the smell from Eduardo's kitchen fills the gallery space and mixes with the smells of various artistic materials.



Image 11: ASARO Artists spray paint stencils in the city center in protest of the State's role in the Fall 2014 murder and disappearance of 43 student teachers. Photo by ASARO.

As part of their duties to the collective, some members are present every day at the space to create, sell, and market ASARO merchandise. Ivan, who lives adjacent to Espacio Zapata, is responsible for printing the ASARO tee-shirts that are sold to tourists throughout Oaxaca. At least three times a week he could be found in the workshop busy printing ASARO images on products. He explained to me that it was his way of giving back to the collective that allows him to print his images and artwork for no cost. José, who could be found every day at the workshop working on his graphic images and updating ASARO's online media pages, was also responsible for greeting any visitors that entered the gallery space. José was first active in ASARO during the 2006 rebellion when he was intrigued by the organizing efforts and influence of other artists. Although he was only 14 at the time, José began to slowly learn the techniques of print making and eventually would graduate from high school and attend the university to formally study art. Today he makes his living working as a photographer for private events and spends all his free time at Espacio Zapata. At any time, other ASARO members and friends of the group could stop by to hangout or share news or updates about current events and local/national issues. A single unplanned visit with news has many times inspired a collective project or a new collaborative painting. With one single Facebook text message, the widespread ASARO community could be easily mobilized. When Eduardo heard about the disappearance of a lead activist in Oaxaca, he quickly got on his phone and told me "we are not going to be quiet tonight" as he messaged other ASARO members to inform them of the news. The next morning, when I stopped by to visit Eduardo in Espacio Zapata, he greeted me with tired eyes and all black clothing covered in paint. His hands and fingernails were covered in black paint, a testament to the work invested into putting up new images throughout the city that called out the

government's role in the disappearances, and demanding the safe return of the disappeared activists.

On the days when large projects were being completed, one could smell paint and acetone and hear the loud upbeat Mexican rock music from far outside the workshop. The entire workshop floor space was occupied by various work tables with three or four members around them - collaborating on an image or stencil production. While a project may have started from a single idea or event, it slowly evolved as the project took form. During the creative process, participants added their distinct viewpoints and ideas into the discussion, and the image slowly grew to encompass a small element of everyone involved. Throughout this creative process, members organically discussed what their ideas and plan of action were. There was a constant back and forth shouting as participants struggled to compete for their voice to be heard over the loud music. Constant joking and laughter filled the spaces, and there was typically plenty of food and drink available during these creative processes. Throughout the day there was a continued flow of artists and their family and friends to and from the workshop as people balanced their daily responsibilities and jobs with their desire and commitment to participate in the projects.

A few ASARO members including Yescka and Mario, who were interviewed for this project, have achieved high levels of notoriety and fame for their artwork. Both Yescka and Mario have traveled all over the world sharing their artwork and techniques. During the course of the summer's research, Yescka traveled both to Cuba and Germany to exhibit his prints and give workshops. Due to their notoriety, artists like Yescka and Mario make significant amounts of money from the sales of their artistic works. Other artists in the collective have traveled to California, New York, Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala, Canada, Sweden, and the Netherlands to share their work. Yescka explained to me that selling their work outside of Oaxaca is a "great

way to not only spread the ideology and work of ASARO, but also is critical for funding the collective's activities and future projects".



Image 12: ASARO protest stencils. Left: Indigenous dancers hold rifles in their hands. The Image calls for the boycott of the annual Guelaguetza (celebration of indigenous dances) that is marketed by the State for tourists and instead encourages the popular Guelaguetza which is organized by the pueblos themselves. Right: Images of Oaxacans with the writing "ASARO, art by the pueblo and for the pueblo". Photo by Author.

Despite his notoriety, Yescka explained to me that his role in the collective was equal and in no way more important than any of the lesser known artists. Despite this, due in part to his notoriety, Yescka appeared to take on the spokesperson role for the movement - giving interviews for local and foreign media publications. Although all of the members of ASARO were adamant that there were no hierarchies in the organization, members such as Yescka often had more success selling prints of their work in public and hence made more money from these sales. The members of ASARO who used art as their livelihood and resided close to the city center could be found daily in the workshop taking advantage of the free materials and print machines. Other members of ASARO who came from pueblos (towns) far outside of Oaxaca were often attracted into the movement through direct relationships with family members from the city or through participation in ASARO workshops and, due to their geographic distance, they did not frequent Espacio Zapata. Eduardo, who is from a rural town about an hour from the city, explained to me that he was first

dragged into ASARO by Yescka, who is basically my cousin. It was during the beginning of the political turmoil in 2006. Yescka came knocking at my door and told me let's go support the teachers. I was expecting to start throwing molotov cocktails or rocks. Instead, Yescka showed me how to use paint as a weapon. I was instantaneously hooked. At this time he was studying art in the university. I knew nothing. I had never graduated high school. Our mobilization in 2006 gave me a new meaning and purpose in life. I am a completely self-taught artist.

Eduardo now makes his living as a chef at *Atila del Sur*, a small restaurant with five tables that he started off the side of ASARO's Espacio Zapata. He prides himself in being the only true slow food restaurant within Oaxaca. Unlike the expensive, touristy slow food restaurants whose prices exclude and marginalize local patrons, Eduardo prides himself in staying true to "his people". "I always buy and sell my food at fair prices. It is the true example of locally sourced and ethical food that is available to everyone." Eduardo sells his daily food menu at around the same price an average working class Oaxacan would pay for their food (approximately 50 pesos). With his earnings he helps contribute to the collective's rent and gas and water bills. Other ASARO members from rural areas or poorer parts of the city were typically less prevalent at the workshop as they made their living working other non-artistic jobs. They often appeared to lend their hand for major projects or events, and during times of social unrest and unease. However, unlike the other more active members, their membership was strictly limited in their ability to take the time away from work and family to produce and participate in the artistic production.

As a collective, ASARO members represent a diverse group of backgrounds and experiences. The majority of the artists that I worked with were from lower income families and self-identified as either having full or partly indigenous backgrounds. Seven of the ten members that I interviewed were from the city and tended to have a more stable financial background than those members who I interviewed from outside the city. While some of the artists have studied or are current students at the Benito Juarez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, others have

established themselves as well-known graffiti artists after joining the collective with little training. Out of the participants in this study, all of the ASARO members who attended university were from the city area. While on the other hand, only one of my participants from outside the city graduated from high school. This glaring disproportion embodied the very economic, social, and cultural marginalization of people from Oaxaca's pueblos that ASARO members were deeply dedicated to fighting. Despite these differences, each member of ASARO had their own equally important and respected focus and specialty within the movement. There was no visible hierarchy between members of the group based on their personal background and educational experiences. Some members voiced their grievances in stencils, others created block prints, and other members were responsible for circulating fliers and wheatpastes or printing images on clothing to sell throughout the city. Other members took photos and videos of group installations and maintained related blogs and social media sites. Each member decided for themselves in what form and fashion they would contribute to the group. Many of the artists involved in ASARO were also active and had strong connections with other artistic groups and assemblies throughout Oaxaca. Besides a small amount of funding that ASARO now receives from the Mexican government to conduct their community education initiatives, the collective is completely self-sufficient. When asked about the contradictory action of accepting aid from the same government that they are often protesting, ASARO members reassured me that it was a necessary evil to succeed their goal of spreading the power of artistic expression throughout Oaxacan communities. When I first learned of this surprising source of funding, Eduardo was quick to explain to me that it was the Mexican government that was being fooled. He laughed at my question and explained to me that it was a necessary evil to accept government money.

We were able to have such an important influence throughout Oaxaca, that the government could not ignore our presence. They are funding our community

projects to spread the arts throughout other communities in Oaxaca – and hey, if it aids us in our overall mission of inspiring and educating young Oaxacans, we are all for it. I personally find it funny and ironic. Finally the government is using their money for something beneficial. I am glad we are getting their money.

In addition to small amounts of government funding, the group sells copies of their prints, as well as shirts, bags, bookmarks, hats, stickers, and pins with their most iconic images on them throughout the streets of Oaxaca. The majority of these sales go directly back to the collective to fund their supplies and project initiatives. The other small percentage of sales is divided between the collective artist who created the image being sold, and the member who actually sold the item. Not only does ASARO act as a social space that develops and strengthens community, but it also provides small economic incentives to its members.



Image 13: Oaxaca's rebellious heart T-shirt for sale in Espacio Zapata. Photo by Author.

The successful organization and centrality of artists and their artwork to the movement continues to resonate as an important point of pride for the artists. Their contribution and influence during the 2006 popular uprising motivated artists throughout Oaxaca to continue

producing their artwork. Artists rally around their shared commitment to “get up” for the people. At some point during all of my interviews informants either directly referred or hinted towards their sacrifice for the common good of the pueblo. For the artists, their dedication and commitment to producing their artwork outweighed the very serious and real threat of police and state violence. In many examples of their artwork, ASARO artists memorialize the sacrifices that many artists make in their dedication to cultural, social, political, and economic causes. They firmly believe in their right to express themselves freely within public spaces without the threat of State violence and retaliation.



Image 14: ASARO Graffiti stencil mural depicting the police murder of a young artist with crayons. The writing behind the mural reads: "No to the criminalization of Art". Photo by ASARO.

Today, Oaxaca’s street artists continue to express themselves through various mediums of art including stencils, graffiti, block prints, fliers, wheatpastes, paintings, and creative videos. However, the majority of ASARO’s artwork is focused on print techniques because the material can be acquired anywhere and it is relatively inexpensive. Print making is a relatively easy process that involves putting an engraved block to ink and paper - meaning images can be

repeated in different inks and papers an infinite number of times. None of the members of ASARO pay to use the equipment and supplies in the space. According to ASARO member Ita who is from a rural pueblo and frequents the workshop about once or twice a week when she is in the city, using alternative print medium allows artists to “take it home, work with it, come back to it, and then print it. It is actually a broadcast medium that gives itself to copy, after copy, after copy and it can, as a result, reach many people. It’s theirs to take”. As these works of art circulate through social spaces they are not simply reproduced but are recontextualized in each new space. ASARO uses city edifices as canvases to remix the Mexican nationalism tradition of employing muralism as a form of public information and as a means to gain international attention for the arts. During a chat in Espacio Zapata about ASARO’s use of protest art with a group of European tourists Mario explained that during times of struggle, “Mexicans have a long history of using tools to make graphics reproducible. Here (in Mexico) we have a great tradition of graphic production that is aimed at utilitarian and social purposes. We, the members of ASARO, try to further that tradition.”



*Image 15: One of many printing machines Inside Espacio Zapata, ASARO’s workshop.
Photo by Author.*

As a group of artists with different experiences and visions, ASARO pulls together diverse members and experiences and responds to various political, social, economic and environmental issues. The collective covers an eclectic range of subjects and is open to all means of expression. ASARO embraces debate, inclusiveness and difference. Each month the group organizes around a theme that is chosen by the group, and that is then expressed in an exhibit or other form of project produced by some of the ASARO artists as well as outside artists and participants. This past March, ASARO organized a gallery exhibit focusing on “Mujeres en la lucha (women in the fight)”. This exhibit demonstrated the artwork of numerous ASARO’s female members. According to Ana, one of the artists who contributed to the exhibit, participation in ASARO has allowed her to voice her concerns and experiences as a woman in Mexico. Ana explained to the audience how her artwork is a means for her “to visually show the realities of being a female today in Mexican society. I want my artwork and example to inspire other girls to find their voice identity and confidence to express themselves freely.” In choosing to join ASARO, Ana enjoys the freedom that the organization gives to its members - to choose what is important to them and how to express that to the public. “No topic or viewpoint is off limits here.” Cultural events hosted by ASARO open up spaces for ASARO artists to network with others to develop and discuss pragmatic, bottom-up installations that are meant to dialogue with members of the community - not speak for them.

On any given day while walking through the city, it was not an uncommon occurrence to see both locals and tourists admiring the numerous manifestations of street art on the city’s edifices. During rush hour one day while waiting for the city’s collective bus, I noticed a group of local Oaxacans standing around the bus stop corner discussing the ASARO image on the wall behind them. Cleverly placed in an area of high foot traffic, the image was paying homage to the

43 murdered student teachers from Oaxaca's neighboring state of Guerrero. One middle aged man commented on how the Mexican government was shameful and how abysmal things looked for Mexico, while another stated that if these events had happened to Oaxacans in Oaxaca, the whole city would be up in flames. "People here (in Oaxaca) we just have no patience for this type of stuff like other Mexicans do," he commented to his friends. A middle age women who was also listening to their commentary shook her head in disgust and mumbled, "how sad - what a waste of young life. They could have been my sons". It was clear that these images on the walls were inspiring public reaction and debate like they were intended to. For locals, the artwork is meant to speak to the passerby about current issues and remind them of their shared identity and experience as Oaxacans. For tourists, the artwork is meant to tell them that there is more to Oaxaca than what the tourist imaginaries highlight and frame as a peaceful and docile region of Mexico. The images point to the distinct history of exploitation, marginalization, and resistance that defines Oaxaca.



Image 16: "toma tu dinero ij devuelveme mi dignidadij" (take your money- return me my dignity!!!) ASARO stencil on popular street in city center. Photo by Yescka.

Members of ASARO firmly believe in the power of dialogue and the power of popular assembly. Their manifesto states that they, “resumed the form of the assembly because we believe in the possibility of recovery of force in the art community and because the assembly is the way we dialogue and make decisions based on the collective interests.” Collectivism has historically strong roots in Oaxacan social organization due, in part, to the state’s isolation and indigenous roots sparing it from capitalist investments in private property. As a result, *comunalidad* (communality) rejects individualism, privatization, and mercantilism. Instead, *comunalidad* favors a system of reciprocal responsibilities that respect diversity and replicate plurality. In their form of social organization, each individual is supported by a network of others and, in turn, contributes their unique talents for the good of the whole. ASARO members rally around and mobilize against economic and cultural repression and believe that unified active resistance generates a power that individual articulations cannot.



Image 17: ASARO artists use teamwork to apply stencil in street. Photo by ASARO.

4.4 ASARO Images in the Urban Landscape

The majority of ASARO's current projects are focused around current cultural challenges facing Mexico. These include political corruption and repression, and gender and environmental violence. The artwork that ASARO creates on the streets is designed to directly engage the passerby in debate. The artwork is often accompanied by words or a phrase that directly speaks to, or includes the passerby (i.e. you, us, we the people). It evokes the public to think about their current situation in society with the hope that such reflection will inspire reaction and reevaluation of current circumstances. During an interview, ASARO member Mario further explained that:

when we put art up on the walls, they become public because the streets are where the people, our people, circulate. We take those walls and intervene through them. We take those walls that don't say anything and give them voice. Even the textures, the colors, and the stains of those walls are integrated with the images that capture them.



Image 18: Street Stencil. Zapata's eyes with the phrase: "Open your eyes...Oaxaca is awake". Photo by Author.

The artwork of ASARO out in the street of Oaxaca is meant to be transformative. Both physically changing the city landscapes as well as changing the perceptions and viewpoint of passersby interacting with the artwork. According to Irving, because of the work of ASARO,

the walls of Oaxaca are never quiet. They are always talking, with my comrades throwing up stencils and communicating something that is so important to them that they are willing to risk their safety and life to share that message. What I found interesting was that someone would come and put up a stencil and then someone from the government would come and paint over it. Then, after that, that same determined person would put up another stencil. This whole game involved people that would come to intervene on both sides. What emerged was an ensemble of forms of communication that you [passerby] were interacting with without even knowing that you were communicating.



Image 19: Wheat paste on floor of public space. Face of Zapata accompanied by writing "Do don't step on history, it is your previous life!". Photo by Iván Arenas.

According to Mario, the group offers no single message because "their main goal is to encourage and foster public participation in reading, interpreting, reinterpreting, and representing

revolution in Oaxaca”. They want to make art accessible to all marginalized and oppressed people of Oaxaca as a means to publicly express themselves in a productive way. As he designed a new block print, Chapo described to me his belief in the importance to communicate with people in public spaces throughout the city. He explains that the streets are where he looks to leave his artistic information because that is where the people are most marginalized. “It is these people, the pueblo, which gives me meaning for creating consciousness.” Yescka, ASARO’s most well-known member, further explains the importance of graffiti and street art in returning artistic production into the hands of the majority. “It’s an attempt to reintegrate art into society. I feel that art right now is standing outside society because it belongs to a limited sector of galleries, intellectuals and museums. I believe art is for everybody and that’s why we’re trying to create a link, so that the people can get in touch with art in their everyday lives again.” ASARO is actively working to remove art from the elitist and exclusionary spaces of galleries and museums. According to Eduardo, the artwork that is produced within the walls of the collective is

more about the process and the meaning of creating the art, than it is about the “quality” of the finished work of art. None of us care about that. What is important is that the youth are expressing themselves, for sometimes the first time, in a way that is productive and empowering. Art allows us to say what we want to say in public, but can’t say.

During the summer of 2015, the artists of ASARO were heavily involved in the day-to-day unfolding of events in the city and throughout Mexico in general. I arrived in Mexico only three weeks before a midterm election. Aggravated by the current presidential party’s corruption and violent oppression towards political and social groups who critiqued their administration and policies, numerous groups on the Left throughout southern and central Mexico campaigned for an overall boycott of the elections.



Image 20: Making group stencils inside Espacio Zapata- ASARO's workshop and gallery in Oaxaca. Photo by Author.

Throughout Oaxaca, the powerful teacher's union organized a large scale campaign to boycott the electoral process. ASARO members, who generally supported this push, were active in spreading this message visually throughout the city. When I asked why they had lost faith in the electoral process, Eduardo explained to me that

the whole system is fucked. Those in power are those with the money to buy the elections. It doesn't matter which party you vote for. They are all in the same pockets of the same people. Voting is just a large scam. A total joke if you ask me. It fools people, the average citizen, into thinking that they yield a tiny little bit of power. We are tired of elections that are bought. The people will never get a voice unless the whole system is changed from the bottom up. Politicians will never have our best interests at heart. We need to burn the old system and start again from the bottom up. This starts with recognizing that voting is a waste. If we vote we are saying that we believe in a system that is fundamentally broken and corrupt.

As we walked through the bustling midday crowd of Oaxacans on their way to eat their big meal of the day, Eduardo was excited to show me his most recent favorite print. He walked me down one of the main streets in the city center until we reached a corner that he had recently posted a wheatpaste of his image on. We arrived on the corner and Eduardo was instantaneously aggravated to see that the majority of his paste had been pulled apart from the wall. “That okay,” he told me, “I have about 90 more of these wheatpastes to put up.” Just two days later I passed his image of a Mexican politician stuffing his obese face with money and bribes while the average Mexican stood in the background starving, begging for food, on the same street just a few block away. During the time of the election, ASARO artists were active in campaigning their fellow Oaxacans to boycott the election and many of the artists directly participated in the protests and demonstrations that shut down many of the voting polls. In addition to the summer 2015 election, ASARO artists were actively involved in many of the other daily social, political, and environmental events unfolding in the city.



Image 21: Indigenous women with "rebelde" red bandana. Symbolizing the empowerment and resistance of Indigenous women who are typically portrayed as docile and passive in State discourse. Photo by ASARO.

As the news of disappeared union leaders reached the collective, the artists were quick to organize a visual demand for their safe return. By putting the faces of those who had disappeared and were victimized in the center of public spaces, the artists explained to me that they were forcing Oaxacans and tourists alike to interact with the state-backed crimes that were occurring daily throughout the city. Cesar explained to me that “they were forcing people to see and cope with what was going on. Our art just doesn’t allow them to continue on with their daily lives and vacation like nothing is going on around them. That is what the government wants.”

As prints, many of ASARO’s images are highly repeatable and ubiquitously distributed throughout Oaxaca’s cultural urban landscape. Anyone can put paint to stencils and participate in leaving a collective mark on the walls of the city. ASARO members believe that it is important to appeal to tourist audiences throughout Oaxaca as a means to spread their ideas, history, and struggle outside the borders of Oaxaca. However, it is important to note that many of these images reference events, ideas, and feelings recognizable to Oaxacans and not necessarily to the casual tourist. In essence, filling Oaxaca’s historic and touristy city center with images designed for and by Oaxacans is a direct challenge to State traditions and policies that reserve and market that space to the tourist. According to Mario, “We live in a society where space is not socialized, it is owned privately, so ASARO says that since the walls encircle the people, we need to make them, the walls, intervene for/with the people”. ASARO’s poignant intervention within the quaint veneer of the city center directly challenges the image of the destination promoted by tourism. ASARO’s artwork brings attention to a different side of Oaxaca that is hidden from most tourists. It reveals social problems within Oaxaca while, at the same time, paying homage to the colorful and artistic customs throughout Oaxaca.



Image 22: Street stencil: Zapata with pencil instead of gun "Defend the Education!" Photo by ASARO.

4.5 ASARO's Artwork and its Transformative Potential

In the ASARO Manifesto, the group states that they proposed to “start an art movement in order to be in direct contact with people in the streets and public spaces... “We believe that artistic expression needs to be a form of communication that allows dialogue with all sectors of society and enables the display of real existing conditions, rules, and contradictions of the society that we inhabit.” During a conversation with one of the founding members of Oaxaca’s graphic art movement his wife, Elena, came into the room offering me a cup of café. Upon hearing us discussing the potential impact of the messages that the artwork possess, she quickly interjected into our conversation, visibly excited to share her experiences with, and relationship to, such art. She explained to me that before she met her artist husband she “walked around blind to the reality of the world she lived in.”

I knew that I was unhappy in my daily life. I was working over 12 hours a day and could barely feed myself and my family. It was as if I was a zombie walking soulless, hopeless, without life through the world that I lived in. I was complacent in my own exploitation. I felt nothing. Then I met José [husband] and his artwork spoke to me. It opened up my eyes to the injustices, exploitation, and violence

that was keeping me down. Such messages are hard to ignore. The artwork was something that anyone can understand. That's why it is so powerful. You don't need to know how to read to get the message. The reality of the artwork wakes up anyone suffering in our society. His artwork really saved me. It gave me meaning and a visual way to understand my place in society. I finally begun to have self-respect in my identity - proud to be a strong indigenous Oaxacan. The artwork inspired me to learn about and educate myself on issues such as NAFTA and neoliberalism. The images so skillfully depicted these issues in ways I could understand and relate to.



Image 23 : ASARO Street Stencil and Graffiti Face of Zapata with words: "100 years I think in you, Revolution" Photo by Author.

Elena's interjection was a strong example of the transformative power of the artwork created by Oaxaca's graphic artists. Through her interaction with the artwork, she developed a new consciousness about her identity as an Oaxacan woman and the role of global forces such as neoliberalism. Elena credited the artwork with lighting her rebellious side. "For the first time in my life I felt proud to be an Oaxacan" she explained to me. "This is a pride that they [those in power] have long tried to oppress. Regardless of how hard they try, we will always have that spirit that makes us different from the rest of Mexico - I don't think the rich understand that. We will never back down." Elena's reaction to the artwork produced by ASARO illustrates how the group creates awareness by challenging its viewers with representations that question socially accepted stereotypes.



Image 24: Woodblock Print "Lucha" (fight) Depicting an indigenous woman rising up from oppression. Photo by ASARO.

In the attempt to inspire other marginalized Oaxacans like Elena, the majority of ASARO's mission is directed towards community workshops throughout some of the poorest and most marginalized communities of Oaxaca. ASARO's workshops help young people gain confidence in themselves. Cesar, who is actively involved in the planning and organizing of these outreach initiatives, believes that "for those struggling in many of Oaxaca's poorest communities, these workshops represent power and help those to grow stronger in their resistance to the problems they face". According to Vanessa, an active member of the graphic art movement, "We promote workshops for communities with the goal to unite more people to the artistic movement and to, in effect, multiply in regions outside of the city center's clusters of resistance. These workshops create spaces in which youth can visualize, and artistically vocalize their reality."



Image 25: Wheatpaste representing police repression and brutality towards Oaxacan people. Photo by Author.

ASARO's workshops directly challenge the traditional relationships between centers and peripheries by reaching out to youth in the shantytowns and rural communities outside the capital city. Whether they are from shantytowns at the edge of the city, or rural countryside and mountain communities, these youth are marginalized and, as a result, their access to centralized power structures is tenuous. By teaching youth drawing, painting, stencil making, and printing techniques, these workshops bring youth into the city space and invite them to leave their marks and to share their stories on the walls and sidewalks throughout the city center. In essence, these workshops teach youth to act as integral parts of the cityscape - a space that they have historically been excluded from. According to Ita, these workshops are intended to

change the word art around. To demonstrate to other youth that art can be done from the ground up. Museums can be intimidating to many people because they don't think they will understand what is inside them or oftentimes feel like they are not permitted in these spaces - there is no real option to interact with art this way. We go to the street and put some there that people can really interact with- whether they want to or not. Graffiti stencils can communicate with passersby

who didn't think they could understand art. That's the empowering type of communication. Everyone can participate in it.



Image 26: ASARO Workshop class in Espacio Zapata. Photo by ASARO.

During these workshops, youth participants are encouraged to reflect on their own Oaxacan and indigenous identity and to define what these identities mean to them in a contemporary, globally connected world. Much of ASARO's artwork brings peripheral issues into urban discussions and debates. Due to Oaxaca's foundation on agricultural roots, many of these images cover environmental debates including GMO corn, oil mining, and issues over land rights/ownerships. Rural communities from Oaxaca also represent some of the largest percentages of migrants arriving to the U.S. to work in agriculture. As a result, many of ASAO images speak to the violence, inequality, and exploitation surrounding the process and experience of transnational migrations.

4.6 ASARO's Symbolic Remix of Iconic Imagery

Often times ASARO images get remixed with countercultural youth elements such as hip hop and punk rock. They create pieces that blend urban hip hop ideas with indigenous concepts

of communality. Some of ASARO's most iconic images are their graphic representation of Mexican revolutionary leader, Emiliano Zapata, and famous artist and revolutionary, Frida Kahlo, as punk rockers with Mohawks.



Image 27: "The Rebels" Silkscreen Image. Photo and Image by Yescka.

These images redefine iconic Mexican leaders and give them meaning and continuity for contemporary Oaxacan youth. It connects the past to the present in a way that repurposes historic figures to fit in to current day struggles and culture. ASARO artists have especially embraced the image and symbol of Zapata - even naming their workshop space Espacio Zapata (Zapata's space). For Oaxacans, the image of Zapata not only represents a famous revolutionary, but a man who embodies the rural people and the fight to protect their rights to the land. According to Mario,

until Zapata's last day he kept fighting, demanding better conditions. Zapata is associated with the revolutionary. In Morelos he established a government of the people - and with them armed you didn't need a specialized police force. Imagine

that! It was the people that made sure there wasn't delinquency. He gave us a model our communities can identify with and rally around.



Image 28: Punk Zapata- Graffiti Image. Photo by Yescka.

Zapata's image holds significant meaning for Oaxacans who continue to fight against authoritarian political structure and capitalist economic priorities that undermine the livelihoods of Oaxacans and erode Oaxaca's traditional cultural practices. For members of ASARO, their use of Zapata's image represents an iconic symbol of an unfinished movement that continues, albeit in different forms, in current Oaxacan society. The artists purposely re-appropriate his iconic image to encourage systematic change and encourage commitment to accomplishing the revolutionary goals of Zapata which included the ideal of communal ownership of land and worker solidarity.

ASARO's focus on working with children speaks to the importance of inclusion in their public art. In addition to offering a space for children to learn about their recent history and recreate it in an artistic manner collectively in public space, the workshops serve the purpose of

building community between ASARO artists and children from marginalized communities. By reaching out to children from outside the city, the artists directly challenge structures that have historically inhibited such communication. Thus these workshops, in effect, bring the Oaxacan population that has been cut out of the capital city back into public view. Through artistic production, these marginalized populations are no longer silent. ASARO gives youth the opportunity to publically express themselves and their unique perspectives. According to Chapo, ASARO workshops “are a form of giving back to the people who don’t have creative spaces and supplies”.



Image 29: ASARO Woodblock print: GMO Corn cobs like bombs, and a grasshopper (symbol of Indigenous Oaxaca) with a gas mask. A commentary on genetically modified corn and its disastrous effect on the livelihoods and identity of rural Oaxacans. Photo by ASARO.

The majority of ASARO’s recent organizing is focused around memorializing the 43 student teachers from Ayotzinapa, Guerrerro that went missing during the fall of 2014 and were subsequently brutally murdered at the order of government officials. ASARO has organized

large-scale projects throughout the city to express their anger and to vocalize their dissatisfaction with the current politics, violence and corruption in Mexico. These projects solicited the help and participation of all residents of Oaxaca. In January 2015, ASARO members and community participants strategically planned out and implemented the painting of all 43 students' faces on public walls throughout the city.



*Image 30: ASARO "Nos Falta 43" (We are missing 43)
Project: Spray Paint Face Stencil. Photo by Author.*



Image 31: ASARO finished Ayotzinapa Stencil "Get out Peña (Mexican President)". Photo by Author.

Their artworks explicitly call out the government's role in the disappearances, and demand the resignation of those in power who are responsible. During the summer of 2015 when the majority of field work for this project was conducted, Oaxaca experienced a series of tumultuous events including election time protests, teachers' union blockades, and environmental activism against city construction projects. As these events were unfolding, the artists were reacting, organizing around, and participating in these issues. Unlike during the 2006 social protests which attracted diverse public support, current day social mobilizations in Oaxaca are met with public indifference and even hostility. As more and more residents of Oaxaca shift their support away

from the teachers' movement, artists find themselves struggling to find that same sense of meaning and influence that they experienced in 2006.



Figure 32 Street Stencil of Benito Juarez holding the head of current Mexican President Pena Nieto, "Get out traitors". Photo by Author.

In all of my interviews, the artists returned back to their nostalgia for what they accomplished during the events of 2006. Their stories were filled with pride in their shared sense of accomplishment. All of the artists shared similar hope that their artwork could once again inspire their fellow Oaxacans into action. José explained to me that he believed it was the collective's job "to consistently remind the public of what we collectively achieved back in 2006." According to José, things have gotten even worse in Oaxaca and throughout all of Mexico since 2006. He explained that people [Oaxacans] "are poorer and more oppressed than they have ever been. They are so abused that they have had the fire and spirit that make them Oaxacan beat out of them. The purpose of my art is to bring back Oaxaca's Corazon Rebelde. To remind people why we are special." The artwork of ASARO is heavily focused on creating a continuity with the past. The artists attempt to mesh historical events from the past with the realities of what is happening today.

Many of their pieces are both historical and contemporary and suggest a continuity and solidarity across time and space. One of the most popular ASARO images today is “*La Ultima Cena Mexicana*” (the last Mexican supper) created by ASARO member Yescka. It is a piece that uses an iconic religious image to challenge the idea that Mexican drug cartels are the culprits of violence in Mexico.



Image 33: Yescka "La Ultima Cena Mexicana" Woodblock Print. Photo by Yescka.

In the block print, the apostles stand at the table not with Jesus, but with a drug lord with a cowboy hat and semiautomatic rifle. The decapitated head of Benito Juarez, Mexico's only indigenous president, lies on the plate in the center of the table. Some of the apostles at the table have identifiable faces including, the president of Mexico, Pena Nieto, the second wealthiest man in the world, Carlos Slim, ex-presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Felipe Calderon, the governor of the Bank of Mexico, Agustin Carstens, and Uncle Sam. Yescka wants to

take images that have become universal and play with them to change what they say. For instance, the image of “The Last Supper” is an image everyone can

recognize and the discourse on it here has been changed in a way that works to criticize the powerful elite in Mexico. You could see the image from afar and know it's The Last Supper and as you look and start asking "Who's that and that?" you start to learn what is happening. That is what is so cool about transforming iconic images.

Yescka also includes in the image nonspecific faces that are also partaking in the consumption of the feast. These people include a United States police officer and a topless prostitute. The work of art is a clear challenge to the morality of the state, church and corporate forces. It also challenges people to recognize a collective responsibility for Mexico's violence. Blatantly absent from the print are the majority of Oaxacans. They clearly do not have a place at this table. The use of these iconic images requires all viewers to question and to take a closer look at the current circumstances within Mexico - who holds the power and the ways in which they abuse it.



Figure 34 "Pueblo Rebelde," Photo by Mr. Skelton.

4.7 ASARO's Representations of Oaxacans

The artists envision and structure their artwork as a way to remember, remobilize, and revitalize the citizenry of Oaxaca. The majority of artists I interviewed shared the common belief that Oaxaca holds a unique spot in Mexico as its Corazón Rebelde (its rebellious heart).



Image 35: All of the power for the pueblo. Photo by ASARO

The idea that Oaxaca is profoundly important as the spirit and heart of Mexico is a common point of focus in the symbolization found within much of the artwork produced within the collective. Despite the marginalization, exploitation, and racism experienced by Oaxacans, the artists take solace and pride in their roots, and their artwork proves to be a strong manifestation of this identity. The images they produce in highly visible places through which many people circulate, proved to be the most effective form of protest in a place like Oaxaca, where political and economic forces inhibit legal dissent. The artwork of ASARO artists uses creative revitalization to transcend discriminatory and dehumanizing authoritarian restraints. The artist

purposely repurposes state images to give them new meaning for their generation. According to Ita, the images that ASARO employs are “ways for young people to express themselves. To say ‘well, okay let’s take these images that the State uses and transform them into our own symbols of pride - that come from us.’”



Image 36: "Somos Pueblo" Poster. Photo by Photo by Francisco Leonardo Reséndiz

An ASARO poster featured in their “*Abriendo Conciencia*” (Opening Consciousness) show of 2007 continues to be used and posted throughout the city over seven years later. This image superimposes the words “*somos pueblo*” (we are people/town) over the southern half of a map of the historic center while, running along a main street are the words, “do not get lost, we are all APPO.” Given the contested politics of the wealthy northern half and the impoverished southern half of the historic city center, it is no coincidence that the map’s carefully composed

socio-spatial geography articulates the city and the people through its southern landscape, forming an alternative route for navigating the city, one that highlights a different area of the center and runs in different directions from the maps given out free to tourists. The bottom of the image remind Oaxacans that “all of the power is for the pueblo”. The image is an example of how ASARO’s art provides an interpretation of collective belonging and a symbolic identity that challenges dominant interpretations and exclusive imaginations of Oaxacan’s common heritage as promoted through the discourse and image of Oaxaca as a famed UNESCO World Heritage Site.

While clandestinely putting up stencils on city walls, the Oaxacan street artists that I worked with routinely discussed who and what belonged in public space and of their purported democratic right to free speech and unhindered artistic expression. The idea of public space as a site of engagement and debate did color their imagination in regards to the kind of intervention that street art had. For example, in the analysis of Francisco Leonardo Reséndiz (2010:48), a local anthropologist and ASARO member, placing stencils on the street provides a form of expression that “recovers public space, not only as territory, but also as a space of debate”. As Yescka told me, “We [ASARO] are not waiting for the next revolution to start in the global south. We are calling out *compañeros and compañeras* to pick up their literal and figurative spray can, stencil, or sign and to take to the streets wherever they are.” ASARO pieces invite viewers to stand up with the artists and participate in transforming the social reality. Art is seen as a weapon for inclusion. When asked about what he meant by the word pueblo, Mario responded,

when we say pueblo, we are talking about the farm worker, the wage worker, the house keeper, the student etc. We are inspired by them - driven by them - to lift their morale, to inspire them to keep fighting. We make graphic art for the people

that are fighting. For those people who are asleep, we want to give them purpose - a desire to struggle and to break off their chains of exploitation.



Image 37: ASARO Street Stencil and Graffiti: "We are cooking the revolution": Photo by Author.

Today in Oaxaca, the artwork of ASARO is met with mixed emotions and opinions. Many residents who consider themselves members of the Left or who participated in the 2006 uprising pass by the artwork and appreciate the power of its message. The artwork also brings back collective memory of the events and achievements of 2006. Elena explained to me that every time she passed a new stencil or wheatpaste up on the street, she could not help but to smile a bit.

These images are so powerful to me. As I walk by them I am instantaneously brought back to 2006. The streets back then were covered in them - hailing us to come together as a unified Oaxacan front. Today, seeing these images still flourishing throughout the streets of Oaxaca gives me hope. They remind me of what we are capable of, and what we have already achieved. When I pass them on the street, they awaken me from the hole of everyday work and life.

In addition to Elena, many other Oaxacans who were not directly affiliated with ASARO generally expressed that they thought the art was “really cool” and they appreciated what the art expressed and said lots of messages that one could not really say safely in public. Most of the young residents that I talked with (18-30 years old) applauded the artists on their organizing around the 43 student teachers who were murdered in Guerrero. One young man told me how much he appreciated the art and wished he had time to be a part of the project that ASARO organized after the murder of the 43 teachers. “Their artwork really speaks to how we are all feeling as a nation - angry, aggravated, abused, and ready for serious changes.”



Image 38: ASARO woodblock print "The government of the pueblo, by the pueblo and for the pueblo". Photo by ASARO.

On the flip side there were also residents, who were typically older and wealthier, that found the artwork distasteful and destructive. They said that it subtracted from the city's beauty

and iconic Spanish colonial architecture and that it was illegal and wrong. They explained that they saw little value in the images and had no real connection to them. When I asked about their experience in 2006, the majority of these residents either showed little support for the events of 2006 or supported the movement but did not have direct participation in it. Wealthy store owners or large commercial banks and chains are often the target of the street artists. One morning as I passed by the main pedestrian street of Acala in the center of the city, I saw the local manager of the Burger King covering up a newly posted wheatpaste print on his wall. I was too late to see what the full image and message of the wheatpaste was, but it appeared to be a message about boycotting American cultural imperialism. On that same wall there were at least seven other patches of mismatched paint where other images and writing had been covered up. As I passed I said good morning to the man and asked if this was a common occurrence. He nodded in assurance and said that it was a never-ending battle of back and forth. “Just wait” he told me, “in less than a week I will be out here again...”

5 CONCLUSION

The Assembly of Revolutionary Artists of Oaxaca (ASARO) found their birth in the summer of 2006 when the capital city of Oaxaca, Mexico became the hotbed of political unrest in the country. The city was turned upside down when the governor, supported by the Mexican president, sent in riot police to quell the Oaxaca teachers' union annual protest against poor pay and inadequate resources. As a result of unjustified government violence against the teachers, city residents of all backgrounds mobilized in solidarity with the teachers and raised barricades against the police. For months, the citizenry of Oaxaca united and created a diverse collective resistance that was comprised of indigenous organizations, women's groups, rural workers, religious activists, students, human rights organizations, as well as mobilized artists of diverse backgrounds. As my research shows, the events of 2006 continue to inspire and fill the collective memory of those involved in today's art collective. The successful organization and centrality of artists and their artwork to the movement continues to resonate as an important point of pride for the artists. Their contribution and influence during the 2006 popular uprising motivate artists throughout Oaxaca to continue producing their artwork.

Today, Oaxaca's urban art collective, ASARO, continues to act as outlet for Oaxaca's oppressed and marginalized youth population allowing them to not only express their views, opinions, and experiences, but to engage their fellow citizens in important debates and dialogues. As this thesis has shown, in Oaxaca urban street art is far from destructive. It works to create, inspire and build resistance. In the past few years, the walls of Oaxaca have been transformed into a canvas for expressions of social, political, cultural, and economic angst, allowing Oaxacan residents to find their voice in the struggle for a more just and equal society.

Grounded in the theoretical works of Henri Lefebvre (1991), this research explored the ways in which artists impact and influence public space. According to Lefebvre, space is socially produced and public spaces not only provide the grounds for the visibility and voice of marginalized communities, but also works to foster group consensuses and identity for those experiencing and relating to that space (Lefebvre 1991). In examining the art and actions of Oaxacan street artists, I gained a better understanding of how art plays an essential role in the use and appropriation of public spaces, especially in popular social movements like that found in Oaxaca. As the artists explained and demonstrated to me, art plays a crucial part in social activism. In Oaxaca, the urban space is shaping politics and interests rather than simply providing a stage on which to show them. During the 2006 movement and afterwards, ASASO artists have utilized spaces not only to provide the grounds for the visibility and voice of marginalized communities, but to also work to foster group consensuses and identity for those experiencing and relating to that space (Lefebvre 1991).

My research underscored the transformative potential of artists' practices through their investment in utilizing urban spaces throughout the city. As art groups such as ASARO endow material space with memories, mappings, and meanings, space itself becomes a critical site for socio-political contestation. Through the practice of placing their graphic messages on Oaxaca's city walls, urban artists gave visual representation to the historical and systemic marginalization of the Oaxacan people. By manipulating public space, the artists were in direct engagement and dialogue with all of Oaxaca's public. Speaking from the perspective of shared experiences and struggles, the artists' images revealed common points of identification that worked to produce the collective subject of *el pueblo Oaxaqueño* (the Oaxacan people) and helped to inspire collective action and mobilization.

Through examining the daily life, motivations and experiences of urban street artists in Oaxaca, Mexico, this thesis contributed to scholarly understanding of urban youth mobilization and countercultural response to an urban environment filled with violence, injustice, and inequality. The artwork that covers the walls of the streets of Oaxaca is much more than just an artistic counter-cultural response to the economic, political, social, environmental, and cultural crisis in Mexico. In stenciling their graphic messages on city walls, members of this artistic movement are physically and symbolically creating space for themselves in discussions and debates over the future of their state and nation. This study examined the artistic mobilization that is occurring throughout Oaxaca as a positive force that represents an alternative way for Oaxaca's youth to create and participate in debates from which they have historically been excluded.

Through art, Oaxaca's youth are creating and carving out their own space, identity, and voice within the fabric of Oaxacan and Mexican society and politics. Art has not only become the means for youth to assert their voice in both national and international spaces, but has also become a means to empower and mobilize a silenced and oppressed generation. This research demonstrated that urban space is not a passive landscape but is, as Latour (1999) would argue, an actant that interpellates individuals as members of particular political publics. For example, an anti-government stencil hailing *el pueblo* on the front of a municipal building invites a different mode for inhabiting social and physical space from a billboard promoting tourism for foreigners framing the city as the heritage and patrimony of all Oaxacans. In Oaxaca, artists' spatial practices are changing definitions of political agency and public responsibility in an increasingly divided and unjust urban sphere.

ASARO's artwork continues to play an indispensable role in the fight to create a more politically transparent society, and to bringing state-funded human rights violation to the forefront. It gives ordinary people the courage to participate directly in their community's transformations. ASARO continues to produce graphic art with social content, giving educational workshops and exhibits in various locations, covering many themes. ASARO's artwork is meant to be transformative and inspirational, not destructive. According to Yescka, art is one of the greatest tools available to the people of Oaxaca. As we sat in Espacio Zapata discussing new ideas for stencils in the street, Yescka explained to me that:

the stencil in the street is one of the most important tactics of the movement. Maybe because of the fact that creating this type of stencil does not require a lot of effort and the strength of the message that it contains is very good. Without a doubt, in 2006 it was one of the most important tools to spread what was happening in Oaxaca. Many of the people and tourists that arrived looked at the street saturated with images of police violence, or of the governor as a murderer, and realized that there was something not right here. Once a passerby saw these images, it was very difficult for the government to "erase" these messages and they surely spent a lot of money on paint trying to do so.

The artwork of ASARO reminds the passersby of some of the worst problems Oaxaca and Mexico, in general, are facing: political repression, grinding poverty, the perils of migration, threats to indigenous people, and environmental damage. In addition, the work of ASARO points to solutions and offers inspiration and the tools necessary to take action. ASARO artists are intent on continuing to inspire debate and dialogue through expanding access to art throughout the community and world. Their artwork acts as a means to disseminate a popular discourse with the goal of uniting a collective Oaxacan identity and experience, unified under the singular term, *el pueblo*.

For the economically impoverished and socially marginalized youths that made up the street art collective I worked with, artistic expression and collective organization became a

means not just to make their voices heard, but fostered communal practices that gave rise to alternative models of human flourishing. Organized through participatory assembly, creating and collaborating on art projects as a group, and holding art workshops to teach artistic skills to members and others, members of the art collective were able to transform their isolation, exploitation and marginalization in order to create a space of dialogue and debate that produced a powerful sociality that went beyond aesthetic expression or the imagined political and social boundaries of the 2006 social movement.

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